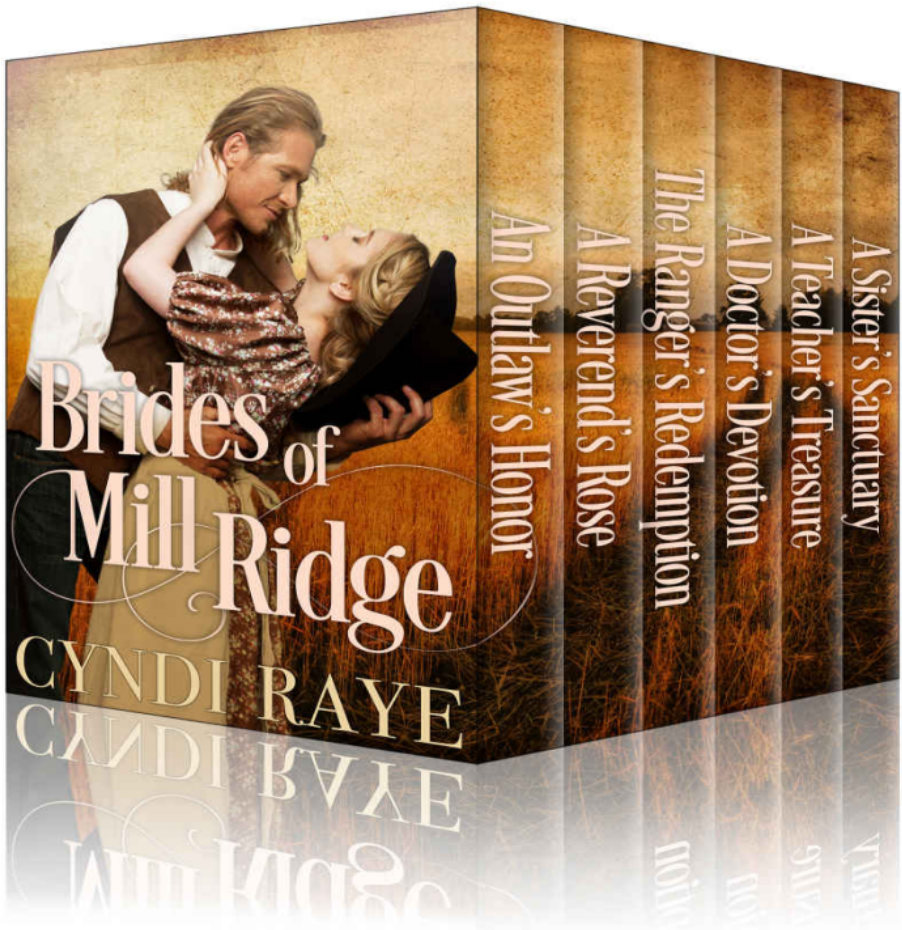

Brides of Mill Ridge
CYNDI RAYE
An Outlaw's Honor
A Reverend's Rose
The Ranger's Redemption
A Doctor's Devotion
A Teacher's Treasure
A Sister's Sanctuary

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From the author of the ***Brides of Wichita Falls, Cyndi Raye*** presents a spin-off series, Brides of Mill Ridge, a pioneer frontier town about an hours ride away.

Brides of Mill Ridge

by

Cyndi Raye

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An Outlaw's Honor

Book #1

Cover by silverheartpublishing.com

Dedicated to CB - Your loyalty to NL is amazing. You love her despite the imperfections. You are a man with honor and a true heart.

Mill Ridge, once a lawless town, was brought to its knees by Sheriff Nightingale and the good folks of Wichita Falls. They invested in the town to make it better for all. With new faces and more people coming west, Mill Ridge is growing by leaps and bounds.

It's a place for second chances, for starting over or to build a life on the Texas prairie where life is hard but worth the struggle to live life on a man's own terms. Brides of Mill Ridge is the story of the brave women who traveled to find their own adventure and happiness in the

West.

"The Code of the West was a gentleman's agreement to certain rules of conduct. It was never written into the statutes, but it was respected everywhere." -- Ramon F. Adams

Chapter 1

"Look out for your own"
-the code of the west

"Good morning, Miss Addie! What brings you to Mill Ridge so early?" Elizabeth was happy to see her mentor at the front door even if the older woman seemed to be in a state of agitation. Her dark well-kept hair was askew, along with a few strands out of place. Elizabeth noted her being a bit out of sorts for the well-managed woman everyone knew and loved.

Miss Addie took off her riding gloves as she stepped in to the foyer of the boarding house. She looked around. "You've done an excellent job here, Elizabeth. I know taking over for Sophie so quickly was difficult and I promise to send you off as a mail order bride soon, you have my word."

Elizabeth welcomed the woman with a hug. "Please, sit and have some tea."

The pot was steaming on the stove. Elizabeth was always up before her guests, planning out the days meals and making sure everything was in order for breakfast. As soon as Rose, her helper and partner for the time being, finished her early morning work, the two would start breakfast.

She poured two cups of tea, setting them on the table, along with a porcelain bowl filled with sugar and a fresh cup of cream. After serving, she sat down to wait for Miss Addie to begin. She knew it was fruitless to ask the older woman any questions until they had their tea. Her curiosity was piqued.

“How is Sophie adjusting to married life with our new sheriff, Salem Nightingale?” Miss Addie didn’t seem to be in a hurry now that she was settled in at the table.

Elizabeth took a sip of tea. She had replaced Sophie, who managed the boarding house up until she married a lawman. “Wonderful, she spent the first few weeks after her honeymoon teaching me the ropes about match-making and running this place. So far I’ve matched a farmer with one of our wonderful ladies. Jocelyn is so happy with Fred Williams. Then there is Nanette, she’s the quiet one in the crowd, she married Jonathan Myers, one of the workers at the mill. I’m very happy you are allowing me to be a matchmaker, Miss Addie, although I’ll never be quite as good as you when it comes to this position.”

Miss Addie shook her head. “Oh don’t be prudent. You do a fine job, everyone tells me so. I’m sure you will have every chance to match up every single man in this town and beyond.”

Elizabeth smiled. “If I did that, I would be out of a job.”

“Nonsense, you will be married off by then to a wonderful man. When you took this position to help get the boarding house and matchmaking service started here in Mill Ridge, I promised to fulfil your original request to find you a wonderful husband, and I will.”

“You are right. Miss Addie. Thank you for the kind words. I believe our Rose is sweet on one of our boarders. And, Reverend Pope feels the same way about her. She is next in line for a husband, but it may turn out I won’t have to do any matchmaking after all. If you would like, please send over two more ladies for me to work with. I will begin my work with them immediately. Perhaps we will wait to see what happens between Rose and the Reverend.”

“I’m impressed, Elizabeth. When we rescued all of the women from that horrible man awhile back, I had no idea so many would still be here. I was certain all of the girls would go back to their prospective homes. I’m happy to say nine of you stayed. Which is a wonderful thing since there are so many single men that need a good wife. We will build this town up just like we did Wichita Falls.”

“There isn’t too many women here and it can be lonely for some of us. If it weren’t for Rose and Sophie, and the two ladies we just

matched up, this town would be all men. We have to fix it soon, Miss Addie. Can you send me two more mail order brides? I have two extra rooms at the moment. I can place two ladies in one room and rent the other spare room out."

"Of course, if you feel ready to take on more, I'll send them over tomorrow. I think I know which two are ready to become brides. My boarding house is filled up and the five ladies left have to share rooms, making it difficult to keep tempers in check at times. Now, the reason I am truly here is to see Sheriff Nightingale. It seems a man rode in to our town last night asking to be directed to Mill Ridge. I was hoping I beat him here since he wasn't up and about when I left this morning."

"I've been up since daylight and haven't seen or heard anyone trek through," Elizabeth answered. "Why the concern?"

"He had the looks of an outlaw. I don't want to alarm anyone but I got the impression he was on a serious quest. He was looking for someone specific. He was asking questions and showing a photo of a woman."

Elizabeth smiled. "No worries then, there are only a few women here. Sophie is happily married, tucked away in the Sheriff's cottage and Rose and I are the only two other women in town. Jocelyn and Nanette live outside of town. I wonder who he is looking for?"

"Perhaps he is here to stir up trouble and yet I don't get that awful feeling about him I usually do when someone bad passes through."

"Well, you go on and see the Sheriff. I'll need to get breakfast started. It's been a pleasure to have you here."

The moment she spoke the words, Rose came tumbling down the steps. The girl was so clumsy, she almost fell down the last three. She came in to the kitchen like a whirlwind, all smiles and tucking strands of hair in her bun. Elizabeth had sent her up to tidy the empty rooms earlier in case a guest arrived without notice, which almost always happened.

"Miss Addie! So nice to see you." Rose gave her mentor a hug, while Elizabeth looked on in amusement. The girl was simply a mess.

"Good day, ladies," Miss Addie told them before rushing out to find

the sheriff.

Elizabeth turned to Rose. “Really, young lady, can you please go and straighten your hair. It looks as if you haven’t combed it.”

Rose giggled. “I haven’t. I woke up late and pushed it back out of the way. Reverend Pope seems to think I am adorable.”

“He told you that?” Elizabeth was shocked. When had the reverend been talking like that to Rose? She would need to keep a better eye on the two. After all, Elizabeth took it upon herself to mentor Rose and get her ready for her stint as a mail-order bride. If Reverend Pope wanted to marry her, he’d have to say so before Elizabeth put any time or effort into finding Rose a husband.

Rose giggled again, placing a pan on the stove. She began to crack the eggs in to the pan, one by one. “He always tells me how beautiful I am, and that I have an inspiring smile.”

“He shouldn’t be telling you those things in private, Rose. He needs to say if he wants to court you.”

Rose sighed. “Oh, how wonderful that would be. I am afraid I’m falling for the good reverend.”

“The reverend is here in the boarding house until his sanctuary is ready. The church is being re-built and the sanctuary will be done shortly. No flirting with the good man, Rose. In the meantime, Miss Addie said there is a stranger coming to town. He was in Wichita Falls last night and is looking for a woman. Steer clear of any strangers, Rose.”

“I will, Elizabeth.” The younger Rose turned to Elizabeth. “Please don’t worry. The reverend hasn’t done anything damaging. He’s a man of God and his kind words were always spoken on the porch in public.”

“I’m relieved to hear this, Rose. I’m afraid we may be short on eggs this morning. I see the good doctor is in town so I’m going to go over to see if I can buy some from his stock he keeps in the back yard. I shall only be about twenty minutes at the most.”

“Take the empty basket and fill it up, please. We may need a few more this morning as I plan to bake a cake this afternoon.”

Elizabeth took the basket, swinging the handle as she left the

boarding house. Rose was going to bake a cake for the reverend after he had mentioned his love of chocolate cake. She smiled to herself. Oh, how wonderful it would be to have the growing excitement of a new love.

She didn't think she'd ever fall in love again. Perhaps Elizabeth was cursed. She had been engaged to a wonderful man. They had grown up together in the same town. Their families spent time together, they all went everywhere together.

When the outlaw gang came to their small town in Kansas, they began to torment the residents. They would rob townsfolk right off the street and no one was able to stand up to them. At first it was mild but when the gang robbed the bank and killed everyone inside, Elizabeth's whole world had changed.

Her mother, father and two younger brothers had been in the bank that day. Her fiancé brother, who owned the bank, was killed, along with his parents and grandmother.

Her fiancé had been out of town, looking over a plot of land he planned to buy. He had saved for two years to buy the land and he had promised her it would be theirs. When he had returned to find his brother and parents dead, along with the others, he had changed overnight.

His behavior had changed as he began sending telegrams to places far away. He spent less time with Elizabeth even though she needed him more than ever. Her whole family was wiped out. She had no one and yet he began to pull away from her no matter what she said or did.

His whole world revolved around waiting for each telegram, then leaving town on his horse for days at a time. His clothing began to get sloppy as if he didn't care what he looked like. Hair that was short and clipped, was now long and choppy, hiding under a wide-brimmed cowboy hat.

Elizabeth became more worried day after day. She watched his looks turn in to one like the outlaws he swore he hated.

Then one day he simply rode out of town. She had watched from her family home as he mounted his horse, knowing deep in her heart

it would be the last time she'd ever see him.

The hurt that day was too immense to relive. When she had realized what he was going to do, she ran out the front door, lifting her skirts and striking up dust as she ran as fast as she could to stop him from leaving. "Wait! What are you doing?" She had cried out but he didn't look her in the eye.

"I'm a lost soul, Elizabeth. It's better this way. Go on with your life."

She stood there, willing him to look at her but he kept the brim of his hat low over his eyes. "I love you," she told him. "Doesn't that account for anything?"

A strange man she didn't recognize strolled from the saloon, dusting his hat and placing it on his head. He got on his horse and rode over to the two of them. "Ready?"

Her fiancé nodded. He directed his next words to her. "Love someone else. I'm done with this town and everyone in it."

She charged at him, reaching up to grab his leg. She tried to look up at him but he kept avoiding her eyes. "Why, my love, why? We can get through this together."

"Forget about me, Elizabeth Sheldon. I'm not your kind of man. I don't love you any more."

Shock filled her from the top of her head down to the tips of her boots. Her skirts went flying as she ran back to the haven of her family home, unable to watch the man she loved leave town. *I don't love you any more!* She'd never, ever forget those words as long as she lived.

Elizabeth stumbled as she crossed the street, realizing she was revisiting a part of her past she had shoved under the porch mat over a year ago. Was this job as match-maker causing her to relive her past? Perhaps she should tell Miss Addie to hurry and find her a husband. She closed her eyes for a moment, unsure how to move on. If she married someone else, was it fair to them knowing she'd never be able to love anyone else ever again? Her first attempt at love went horribly wrong, then the mail order bride fiasco fell through when that awful man tried to sell them as slaves. Perhaps it wasn't in the

cards for her to be happy.

Realizing it was probably better this way, she decided to tell Miss Addie not to find her a husband. She would stay here, make this home. There was no reason she couldn't run the boarding house and live her life the same as Miss Addie.

"Good morning, Elizabeth. Are you here for some eggs?"

Elizabeth hadn't realized she was standing on the porch of the doctor's office. A few folks were staring. "Good morning, Nurse Ellie. May I buy some please? We're running short."

"Help yourself, Elizabeth. It's busy here today, so just put your money on the counter as you leave. I'm afraid I don't have time to have tea with you."

The good doctor and Nurse Ellie spent two days a week in Mill Ridge to help out until a doctor became available. Miss Addie donated the house and office for the doctor's use since she owned four or five different establishments in Mill Ridge, too. The doctor and his nurse-wife were trying to see all of the patients possible in the two days they had available.

So, Elizabeth was glad Nurse Ellie was too busy to talk. She didn't feel like holding a conversation with anyone today. Bringing up the past even in her mind was too distressing. She fumbled at the door to the back yard, stepping in chicken poop one too many times. After a struggle, Elizabeth collected the eggs she needed, placed the money on the counter and quickly left the doctors office without speaking to any of the patrons waiting on the porch.

"Good day, Elizabeth," Nurse Ellie told her as she came out to gather the next patient.

Elizabeth turned to wave to Nurse Ellie who was staring down the street, a look of awe all over her face. It wasn't normal for the nurse to show her emotions. She heard Ellie speaking to one of the townsfolk. "Do you know who that is?"

Elizabeth watched the exchange, wondering why the look of adoration appeared on everyone's face when they began to stare.

Slowly, some townsfolk stood. "It is him! I saw it in yesterdays paper."

“Who?” Elizabeth asked, confused.

“Why, it’s all over the news. The Mill Ridge Journal put the story out yesterday. Didn’t you read the paper, Elizabeth?”

“I, uh, no.” She was ashamed to admit she bought the paper for her renters but was usually too busy to take time to read. Day old paper made good starter for the cook stove.

“You missed it then,” Ellie noted. “I can’t believe we are fortunate to have in our town the Texas Ranger who single-handedly took down the Riley Gang.”

“Texas Ranger? Impressive.” Even though she wasn’t impressed. Where was the law when those outlaws wiped out everyone she had loved in her small Kansas town? She almost hated law men as much as she hated outlaws. Elizabeth should be ashamed of feeling so awful. The bitterness would eat her alive if she didn’t keep it in check. No matter, she had to get back to help Rose with breakfast. The renters would be up and ready to be served by now.

“Have a good day, Nurse Ellie. Stop in for tea soon.”

Nurse Ellie nodded, still staring at the stranger. Elizabeth shook her head, swinging around to see what the big deal was.

The horse was about two feet away. She noticed the Ranger’s clothing first, as the horse was so tall she came face to face with the man’s thigh. She needed him to move on so she could cross the street. When he stayed right there, she tried to keep her temper in check. “Oh for Pete sake, mister. Would you mind, I’m trying to cross the street.”

Elizabeth’s patience was running out. She hadn’t realized she had dallied so long, it was important for her to do her job and make sure her guests were fed and on their way. She pulled the egg basket closer, gathered up her skirts with her free hand and stepped on to the street.

“Elizabeth,” the raspy sound came from the man on the horse, its familiar lull causing her to raise her head in utter surprise.

Her head began to pound, the sound of his voice the only thing she understood. Voices in the background faded out. All Elizabeth saw was a pair of blue-gray eyes staring down at her.

His eyes.

The man she had loved with all her heart and soul.

She let the basket of eggs slide from her fingers. Some rolled from the basket, cracking as they hit the dirt ground.

Her heart felt as if it were pounding a mile a minute, her throat so tight she didn't have the capacity to speak. Shock overcame reality. She knew he was speaking to her, saw the motion of his mouth but had no clue how to make out the words he was saying. He began to slide from the big stallion, and yet she kept her eyes on his, like a magnet, as if she didn't dare break contact.

If she did, this would be a dream and she knew she'd wake up to realize it wasn't real.

Her throat became dry, her nostrils flared. She reached out, wanting to touch him so bad. Her body felt as if it were floating away from him instead of towards him, so she tried to grab him as he came closer. It didn't work, the clouds gathered around and pulled her away. "Noah," she whispered, his name on her lips as she fell into the darkness.

Chapter 2

“Honesty is absolute - your word is your bond.”
-the code of the west

Noah Holloway watched as her eyes began to roll back. He slid from his mount, determined she wouldn’t pass out unless it was in his arms. He moved as quickly as he could, getting there just in time to feel her soft body fall against him. A deep sigh rumbled from within. Noah hadn’t realized he was holding his own breath.

He picked her up in his arms, moving quickly towards the doctor’s office.

“I’m Nurse Ellie, follow me,” the other woman who had stared at him from the porch said. She quickly opened the door, motioning for him to follow.

Nurse Ellie opened the door to the parlor, pointing at the Victorian sofa. Noah placed her gently on the cushion, tucking her loose strands of hair behind her ear. He stared down at her beauty. “She’s just as beautiful as I remember, even more so.”

“You need to leave, sir, thank you for catching her. It isn’t proper for you to be in here.”

Noah straightened up, taking his hat off and nodding. “Suppose your right,” he told the woman. “I’ll wait outside. I’d like to know how she fares.”

“I’ll let you know as soon as she revives. Be gone then,” the nurse motioned.

Noah retrieved his steps, standing on the edge of the porch to wait. The doctor had been in with a patient but he had a feeling Elizabeth would be okay. She had down and out fainted away when she saw the

likes of him.

A grunt came from deep inside. He supposed she would be shocked to see him but he didn't expect her to fall over. Did that mean she still cared?

"Welcome to our town," one of the men sitting on the porch said. "We know who you are and thank you for your service as a Ranger."

"Much obliged." Noah had become a man of few words over the years. From the tragedy of losing so many family members to going undercover in an outlaw gang, he had learned to speak little and watch more than anything.

"Your face is plastered all over the newspapers."

"I imagine so." Noah hadn't wanted to be famous. His purpose was to become a Texas Ranger and bring down the gang who killed his loved ones. He had been so proud to tell Elizabeth that he had joined up with them. But when it was suggested to him to infiltrate the gang, he had to leave everyone behind in order to go undercover.

Elizabeth had to be left behind.

It had almost done him in to hurt her the way he did.

Now he wondered why he hadn't told her.

Except if he had told her, it may have put her in danger.

That's what the Captain of the Rangers told him.

He couldn't lose her, too.

He gave her up to keep her safe. Was there any chance at all for her to love him again?

He had almost kept going after he had captured the murderers. After getting his hands dirty with them, robbing banks and trains to infiltrate the gang, he figured she'd never want anything to do with him again.

Yet, remembering how she had felt in his arms kept him from losing his mind. Her face in his dreams had kept him strong, pushing him to ride with the notorious gang day after day, hurting more people, robbing innocents while determined to put an end to the chaos.

In the end it had all worked out. With the last of the men hung from the end of a rope, he rode out of his home town, determined to

fade away like the sun that set in the distance each night. It was no longer home for him, not without Elizabeth.

He had heard Elizabeth left town soon after he had to become a mail order bride. His heart had been broken, knowing it was his fault and he'd never get to hold her in his arms again. He had told her he didn't love her. Those were the hardest words he had ever spoken. In order to keep her safe, he gave up her up.

"You gonna put a dent in that wooden plank, Ranger."

Noah hadn't realized he was pacing back and forth. His hat in his hand, he looked down to see the brim crushed against his fist.

Thinking about why he was here gave him the courage to stand here and take anything she had to dish out.

He deserved everything he got from her. He had let her down, turning her away at one of the worst times of her life. He had realized it when he was already infiltrated with the Riley gang but it was too late to turn back. He was determined to bring them in and he had.

Had he been too selfish then? Was bringing in the gang more important than Elizabeth? She would think he didn't care enough but he had cared so deeply. His hate and sorrow at losing every single family member had driven him to make their life better.

And sweet revenge.

He would admit it filled him to the brim and made him realize he had brought his family's murderers to justice.

But had he paid the price?

Would Elizabeth ever forgive him?

A deep sigh rose from somewhere deep in his gut.

He would make her forgive him. He was determined to win her over, if it took his last breath.

Nurse Ellie came through the door. She glanced at the two other patients sitting on the porch. "You can both go inside and wait in the hallway. The doctor will be with you shortly. She waited until the two patients closed the front door behind them. "I'm sorry, Ranger, but she doesn't want to see you."

He felt the fingers crushing the felt hat even more than before. "How is she?"

“She’ll be fine. Shook up a bit but after some rest, she will be good as new. I don’t know what’s going on, but in this town we all stick together. Is there something you need to get out in the open?”

The nurse had gumption, that was the truth. “Yes. There is something important to say. Elizabeth is the love of my life. I’m here to marry her if she’ll have me.”

Nurse Ellie placed a hand on each hip. “At the reaction she had, I am having serious doubt you will ever put a ring on her finger, Ranger.”

Noah had serious doubt as well but he knew how to fight when all odds were against him. “I swear to God above she will be my wife.”

Nurse Ellie grinned. “Guess it couldn’t hurt to have a Texas Ranger for a husband.”

“I’m a retired Ranger as of two weeks ago. It served its purpose.”

“Well, sir, if you plan on making her your wife, you will need to clean up and get a job.”

“I suppose so.” He had earned enough money over the last year, along with a hefty bonus for capturing the gang to fill a bank vault. Perhaps it was time to buy some land and settle down.

“I could use a room. Know anyone who lets out rooms?”

Nurse Ellie laughed out loud. “Elizabeth does. Look, mister, you best be on good behavior. You may be a famous Texas Ranger but if you harm one hair on her head, you won’t leave here in one piece.”

Noah grinned. It seemed Nurse Ellie had a soft spot for him.

“The boarding house is over yonder.”

He lowered his head in appreciation before taking the reins of his horse and crossing the street towards the boarding house.

When Noah had first returned to his home town to find she had left to become a mail order bride, he had given up ever looking for her. Then an elderly lady from their home town told him the match-making agency had closed because there had been a man who had duped several of the agencies. The proprietor in Kansas had felt terrible because she had sent several ladies out west and they had been conned by some ruthless thief. One had returned but it wasn’t Elizabeth.

When he had learned they had been conned, he had spent every waking moment in search of her until he finally arrived here, in hopes he wasn't too late to make her his wife. It had been almost a year since they last saw each other.

If Elizabeth ran a boarding house, did that mean she was still single? Did he still have a chance even if she did faint dead away when she saw him?

After stabling his horse for the day, Noah stood at the front door of the boarding house, hat in hand. It had been awhile since he had left the doctor's porch, giving Elizabeth time to rest and get back home.

It was now or never. Taking a step back, Noah almost laughed out loud when the tiny lady covered in flour answered the door. "May I help you, kind sir?" A set of bright white teeth smiled at him.

"Noah Holloway. I'm here to rent a room."

"I see, well, sir, come in, please. No use letting in the flies." She turned the knob, leaving a trail of flour there. "Follow me, please. We have one more room to let out."

Noah felt her presence before he saw her. She was sitting in the rocker facing the window in the parlor. Elizabeth had known he was coming. His intuition as a ranger was always spot on.

She stared straight ahead, never taking her eyes from the window. "Since I won't ever let a man sleep in the street, I'll allow you a room for a short period. This is strictly business and you'd do well to remember. Rose will give you a key and the times allotted for meals. If you want to eat here, we expect you to be prompt as no one will save you any food."

"Much obliged, Elizabeth." Noah understood why she was angry. If he hadn't said those words so long ago, she may have welcomed him with open arms.

"One more thing," she told him. "We'll be getting a new renter next week so you'll have to be moving on by then."

"Why, Elizabeth, we will have plenty of room next week when Reverend Pope moves into his parish."

Noah shrugged. It's fine. "I plan to have my own place by then."

Elizabeth turned to stare. "You're planning to live here?" Her eyes

widened in horror.

It took all he had to hang on to the hat in his hand and not go to her. “I’ve retired as a Ranger. It’s time I settled down somewhere.”

“But, you have a home. In Kansas.”

He watched her fingers turn white as she squeezed her hands together. He was getting to her. That meant something.

Didn’t it?

“Here’s a key. Will you be paying daily or by the week?”

Rose stood in front of him, blocking the view so he was no longer able to see Elizabeth’s beautiful shocked expression.

“I’ll pay for the week,” he told her, dishing money from the saddlebag slung over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” Rose blurted out. She looked from one to the other, confusion lighting up her usually bright smiling face. “You are in room number two, at the top of the stairs. There is a window facing the street. Make sure not to lose your key or there will be a dollar restoration fee.”

“Much obliged,” he told her.

“If you don’t mind signing our ledger that you received a key for the tidy sum you just paid,” Rose told him, pointing to a booklet on a stand by the stairs close to where Elizabeth was sitting in the rocker. “If you’ll excuse me, I have a cake to bake.”

“I’ll be happy to sign,” he told Rose, who disappeared into the kitchen, even if there was no wall to separate the two rooms. She turned her back to the two in the parlor.

Noah kept from reaching out to touch Elizabeth because she was so furious at him, he’d have to take it slow.

“You didn’t answer my question. Your home is in Kansas. What are your intentions, Noah?”

Her soft voice hit him like a mule stopping short of hitting an old oak tree.

He turned to her before going up the stairs. Leaning over, he spoke for her ears only. “Kansas was my home until everything I loved was gone. There is only one place I want to be, it’s where I will build the ranch I’ve dreamed of. It’s where the woman I love will be.”

“You can’t bring back the past, especially when the past doesn’t want you any more.”

It was a blow to his heart that almost drove him straight out the door. He stilled, closing his eyes and allowing the hurtful words to drift over his shoulder. He deserved everything she’d dish out. He spoke the simple words he had taken from her so long ago. “I love you, I never stopped.”

She laughed, the bitterness dripping from her soul.

He winced.

“You looked at me that day and said you don’t love me any more.”

“I had no choice.”

“There’s always a choice.”

“I learned that too late.”

“Why are you here? It’s too late for us.”

“I’m here to honor my promise to you. I aim to make you fall in love with me all over again.”

“An outlaw’s honor? Why would I believe you?”

“I’m not an outlaw, Elizabeth. I never was. I played a part to bring down the monsters that murdered our families.”

He watched her jaw tighten at the mention of their families. “You can’t bring them back.”

Perhaps it was too soon to be speaking of them. “I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know where this will lead, Noah. I want to think.”

“I plan to court you, dear Elizabeth. I promise with all my heart you will love me again.”

He turned and took the stairs, two at a time. His emotions were getting out of hand. He didn’t want to get on his knees and beg her but he was getting close to doing so. That wasn’t the way to win her over. She needed a strong man, one who would hold her in his arms and let her cry on his shoulder. A man like he had been, who vowed to take care of her and those she loved.

He had become a broken man so long ago until he came up with the idea to seek revenge. Even if he had done it the right way, according to the law, it had ripped him of everything he had. It had taken the two of them on a long journey they hadn’t deserved.

Now all he wanted was to hold her once again. Noah shut the door to his room, determined to become the man she had once loved.

Even if she fought him every step of the way.

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Elizabeth bit her tongue. When he had said he promised she will love him again, she had wanted to shout out that she had never stopped.

How in the world was she going to survive the next week? With him being in this room, it had been all she could do to stay planted in the rocker and not rush in to his arms. “Oh God, please help me be strong,” she cried out.

“I believe the Ranger is in love with you, Elizabeth.” Rose stood over her, flour everywhere. She began to brush it off her apron, which was also filled with the white puffy powder.

“He talks a lot,” she told Rose. “Is the cake in the oven?”

Rose nodded, too busy to look up. Her hands scrubbed at the flour.

Elizabeth began to giggle.

Rose looked at her. A wide grin began until she let out a chuckle and then howled with laughter. “I must look ridiculous!”

Elizabeth sobered. “You do, Rose. There’s more flour on you than in the cake, I’m sure.”

Rose leaned down, taking her hands. “Oh, honey, I can sense you are hurting. I don’t know what the history is but there is something between the two of you. What can I do to help?”

Elizabeth burst into tears. She wasn’t normally this emotional but the fact was the man upstairs in the rented room was her everything. She had put him aside this past year, trying to make a life without him.

It had almost been unbearable. Aside from getting kidnapped by that dreadful man and being rescued by the townsfolk of Wichita Falls, her life now was calm, peaceful.

Then in comes her past to stir all those hidden emotions.

“I can’t just let bygones be bygones and take up where we left off.

He hurt my heart so much I can't stand the pain."

"I'm here for you, Elizabeth."

Rose gave Elizabeth a hug that included flour, lots of flour. It tickled her nose. Half laughing, half crying, she hugged her friend right back. "You've been such a good, sweet friend, Rose. Thank you for putting up with me."

"Likewise. Oops, so sorry. I believe there's some flour all over your dress."

"No matter. It will brush right off. Let's go finish that cake, shall we?"

Chapter 3

"Do not practice ingratitude."
-the code of the west.

*"H*ere's the key, Elizabeth. Now you know the eggs you need will be free since you are looking out for the chickens until we return. Don't be shy, take what you need."

"Thank you, kindly, Nurse Ellie. Rose and I will take turns collecting. The rest we'll sell to the mercantile and leave the money in the tin on your counter as agreed. Travel safe!" Elizabeth closed the front door, waving to the doctor and his bride.

They had concluded their time in Mill Ridge and were heading back to Wichita Falls to see the patients there. The doctor looked a bit weary but he was determined to take care of both places until he found a good replacement for here.

Perhaps Elizabeth could be of some help. Why, hadn't Miss Addie found Nurse Ellie through matchmaking? She needed to get to work and find a doctor for Mill Ridge right away. Scurrying across the street, she loaded up fresh eggs in her basket and made her way to the mercantile.

Without realizing, Elizabeth ran straight into a hard chest that was coming out the door. Drat! She had been daydreaming about her new assignment when she looked up in to those blue gray eyes once again. "Noah!" she breathed, her heartbeat pumping ninety miles an hour. Would he be able to hear it?

"Miss Elizabeth," he tipped his hat. "Forgive me, allow me to carry your basket."

“It’s okay, no need.”

“I insist.” Before she knew what was happening, he took the handle from her grip and carried it to the counter. She followed along like a lost puppy dog. Elizabeth almost looked back to see if her tail was wagging. She giggled at the thought.

“You find this amusing?” he asked, a grin on his face.

“Calling me Miss Elizabeth does take the cake.”

“Speaking of cake, when do we get to eat that delicious chocolate cake sitting on the counter?”

“It’s for dinner this evening. We would have had it last night but the reverend was running late. He had been late getting back from Wichita Falls. Rose made it special for him.”

Noah nodded with understanding. “Then if a lady bakes a cake, it means she is impressed with a gentleman?”

“I suppose so.”

“What can I do so you will bake for me, Elizabeth?” His warm breath danced upon her neck. He stood behind her as they talked but she felt him so close. It was not proper for him to be so close. It was good the store owner showed up at that very moment.

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth. Are those eggs for the store?”

She smiled at Noah, a bit devilish, before turning to the proprietor. “Good morning to you, Mr. Dunleavy. It looks like the chickens did a good job today. I’ve got a basketful here.”

Mr. Dunleavy hit the button on his cash register, taking out a few bills and some coins and placing them on the counter. “I’ll sell them all. Too bad those chickens can’t move a little faster. Why, I could sell eggs all day long here.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Mr. Dunleavy, I’ll do my best to move them along. Have a wonderful day.”

“You too, ma’am.” He nodded to Noah. “Ranger.”

Elizabeth knew Noah was still by her side. She gave in and let him open the door for her. No use making a fuss with Mr. Dunleavy watching. He’d have a rumor mill started before she got to her own front door.

They walked together up the street. When they passed the land

agents office, Noah glanced in. He noted the name on the sign. “When do they open up?”

“Mr. Lewis spends most of his evenings keeping the saloon from going broke. I don’t believe he will open up much before noon.”

“Is he an honest man?”

“I believe so. He does work hard to find good people to occupy the buildings. I’ve heard he is fair, except he likes to imbibe a bit too much.”

“Let me walk you back home, Elizabeth. Then, I have something to do.”

“No need to walk me back, Noah. I’ve been walking this route long since before you got here.”

He grunted. “That’s all changed now that I’m here. No lady of mine walks the streets alone.”

Elizabeth swallowed. She wasn’t his lady but had to admit to herself she liked how he said it. Was she softening up so soon? He took her elbow and guided her along the street.

“I know you have no next of kin, but who is the one person you look up to, Elizabeth?”

She stopped. “Why? This is such an unusual question, Noah.”

“It’s important.” He seemed nervous. His hand tightened on her elbow.

“Why is it important?”

He turned her to face him. “I want to court you, Elizabeth. The problem is there is no one to ask permission.”

A hand went to her throat. “Court me? Noah, that’s noble of you but I remain strong in the fact we had our time. It’s too late for us.”

“I won’t ever give up, not until I’m six feet under. All I ask is you keep your heart open for a small amount of time. Please, Elizabeth, let me prove to you that I truly love you.”

She almost gave in. There were no words to describe the feelings that raged inside. Her heart was torn. She did love this man. All those hidden feelings were there, ready to burst open and admit this to him. Yet, her head told her to be sensible. He had left her once before.

Elizabeth took a deep breath, about to make a change that would

affect them both. She took Noah's hands in her own. Improper as it was, she didn't care. Let everyone call her a trollop, she had to tell him what was on her mind. "Noah Holloway, I'm going to be honest with you. I'm so scared it makes me shake all over. I don't know if I can ever get over this feeling. But, I'm willing to allow you to court me. It may not go any further than that. I'm still angry inside that you abandoned me."

"It was for a noble cause, I assure you. I was wrong in not telling you and yet I had to protect you. It's what a man in love does."

"You keep talking about this love you have for me. I'm asking you to prove it beyond all doubt. I won't take our relationship a step further until you do."

There, she said the words that stirred her soul. If there was one man she wanted for all eternity, it was Noah. Yet, she was scared to give him her love again, terrified he'd up and walk out the door for another noble cause. Her heart dare not withstand another storm.

Noah brought each hand to his mouth, kissed one then the other. Her heart beat so fast she was afraid they would hear it pumping on the far-away train in Wichita Falls. "Who is the one person you look up to?" he asked again.

"If you must know, it's Miss Addie, although I've already told you that you may court me."

Noah let her hands go, and began to walk towards the boarding house. "I'm going to drop you off and leave for awhile. I'll be back for some of that cake this evening."

When he dropped her off in front of the boarding house, she watched him hurry to the stable. She stood there for a few minutes wondering what in the world he was doing. Was he going to leave again?

As he came out from the stables with the horse saddled up, she called out to him. "Noah? Where are you going?"

He tipped his hat. Then, at the top of his lungs and not caring who heard, he yelled out, "I'm going to see Miss Addie to ask her permission to come courting."

Elizabeth swung around so fast it made her dizzy. Did he just tell

God and the whole country he planned to court her? She shook her head, heading in to help with lunch, glad there weren't too many people on the street. She had a feeling the two of them would be the talk of the town.

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Noah tied his horse before finding his way to Miss Addie's boarding house. There were a few looks his way but most of the people on the street minded their own business, which he preferred. Years of training to be an outlaw while undercover kept him from too much socializing. To be honest with himself, Noah preferred it this way.

Except he had to talk to Miss Addie. It was only proper he get her permission to court the woman he loved. One way or another, he'd prove to Elizabeth his love was strong enough to see them through the rest of their days. He hoped this would be an important first step.

The door swung open. Miss Addie looked surprised to see him. She stood on her tip-toes and gazed over his shoulder.

"Ma'am," he said. Then turned his head to see what she was looking at.

A long sigh escaped the older woman. "Excuse me, Ranger Holloway, I was expecting a guest."

"My apologies I am not the one you are expecting. May I have a minute of your time."

She smiled, smoothing her hands over her skirts. "Why, of course, sir. Do come in. My guest isn't due for another half hour, although I thought you were him and he was early."

Noah didn't know what to say. It was obvious she was expecting a male caller. Her gown was impeccable, a light shawl around her shoulders. She was going out, he presumed. "I don't want to take up much of your time, Miss Addie. I have an important question to ask of you."

"Please, sit down, sir." She pointed to the couch in the parlor.

After being seated, Noah crumpled his hat between his hands until Miss Addie took a seat. She sat in a rocker directly across from him.

“Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Your obviously in distress, young man. I’d offer you some coffee or tea if I wasn’t expecting someone. We are going out for lunch so I didn’t keep the kettle filled with hot water.”

He held up his hand. “It’s fine. I didn’t come here to take up your time.”

She smiled, seemingly enjoying his anxiety. “Why did you come here?”

He stood up. She raised an eyebrow at him so he sat back down, making a wrinkled mess of his hat. “I, uh, I’m calling because I would like your permission to court Miss Elizabeth. She has already said yes, but I asked her who is the most important person in her life and she told me it is you, so I’d like your permission out of respect.”

Miss Addie didn’t say a word at first. She watched him curiously. “I am honored Miss Elizabeth feels this way. Yet, I believe there is more to your story, young man. Unfortunately, I don’t have the time to listen. I see my gentleman caller has arrived.”

“Can you make a fast decision, please?” He had to have her permission before leaving here. If she didn’t give it, Noah would not go back to Mill Ridge until he got a yes.

She stood up when there was a knock on the door. “Why the hurry?”

He stood, too, his hat no longer crumpled. It was now flattened against his thigh. “I have special plans for an evening out for Miss Elizabeth. I would like to take her to the dessert social this evening. One of the hands at the livery told me they’re having a fiddler there, so there will be dancing and such.”

There was a louder knock at the front door. “By all means, sir, as you are a Texas Ranger, I would expect you to be on your highest impeccable behavior.”

He coughed. “I am a retired Ranger now. I plan to buy some land and start a ranch and make Elizabeth my bride.”

Miss Addie began to walk towards the door. Noah followed. He wondered if he had told her too much. She turned to him, reaching out and patted his shoulder. “You have my permission as long as you

treat her with the utmost respect and honor."

"Yes, ma'am, I certainly will, with God as my witness," Noah promised, then reached over and gave her a hug. He let go and stepped back, embarrassed.

All he wanted to do now was get out of the boarding house and head back to Mill Ridge. He nodded to the gentleman standing at the door on his way out, thinking he would pass by and disappear.

Except Miss Addie was too proper to let him get away. "Ranger Holloway, may I introduce you to Maximilian Randall. He works as the ranch foreman at the Montgomery Ranch."

Noah reached out to shake his hand. "Pleasure to meet you, I'm Noah Holloway, ex-Texas Ranger in case anyone asks. Now, I must be on my way. Good day." Noah tipped his hat to Miss Addie, as skewered as it was, shook it and plopped the hat on his head before taking off as fast as he was able.

Once he was on the trail back to Mill Ridge, Noah stopped in a small glen to admire some wild flowers scattered about. He slipped from his horse and began to pick a few, knowing Elizabeth would love them.

All he cared about was making Elizabeth fall head over heels in love with him every day. He knew she loved flowers so this was going to be an added bonus along with the invitation to the dessert social tonight. He was counting on her going, and hoped no one else would beat him to the invite. She wouldn't allow another man to take her, would she? Not after telling him that he could court her.

His patience was wearing thin. He never worried like this. Ever. When he had pretended to be an outlaw and the chances of getting caught were high, he never cared about the next step of the game. Now, he couldn't keep his mind from worrying about every single thing. Noah wasn't sure he liked this feeling and yet he'd do anything to make Elizabeth fall back in love with him.

This was going to be even more intense than infiltrating an outlaw gang.

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Elizabeth spent the day helping Rose clean and get ready for their evening meal. Since there was a dessert social tonight on the land where the church was being built, Rose decided to bake another cake to share at the event this evening.

Elizabeth found herself staring out the front window in the parlor several times, even peeking out the front door towards the livery. When would Noah return? She knew he had gone to speak to Miss Addie as he had been moving in the direction of Wichita Falls this morning when he had left.

She grinned to herself. If Miss Addie agreed, Noah would court her. She had never been courted before in her life.

"Are you alright, Elizabeth?" Rose stood in the parlor watching her crane her neck out the front door.

Elizabeth giggled. She slid back inside and covered her mouth. "I'm sorry, I can't help this fluttering going on. Noah left for Wichita Falls to ask Miss Addie if he may come courting. I'm so nervous and excited I can barely stand the suspense. I'm not sure I even know what is involved in courtship. What if he wants to kiss? Am I supposed to allow him or no?"

Rose smiled. "I have just the thing. Excuse me." She excused herself, flour dust still permeating the air around her.

In a few minutes, Rose came in to the parlor with a book. Taking her floured hand, she dusted it off and opened it up. "This is a book on basic steps to marriage. I remember reading some interesting things in here about courting." After checking several chapters, she opened it to a specific page, handing the book to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was curious. She began to read out loud. "Marriage and Courtship regulations. They have regulations? Oh, dear!"

"Keep reading, it will help you understand what to expect when your handsome ranger comes courting."

"It says here if a woman is chaperoned by her partner they must never touch unless walking over a rough spot. Oh, my, that may already be a problem."

"How so?" Rose was back at the kitchen table working on the extra

cake.

Elizabeth drew in a deep breath, not sure she should divulge any prior information to Rose. She sat at the table, the book in front of her, then shrugged. Rose was her one friend she wasn't ashamed to confide in. "I'm not sure I like this book. Noah has already touched me. He kissed my hands, he's taken my elbow and walked me home."

Rose grunted. "No one has to know. What else does the book say?"

"It says women are required to stay pure until marriage. Well, no problem there. It also says to marry within one's class and that a marriage has to be blessed by one's father. That of course, is a problem for me since my father has passed, may he rest in peace."

"I wouldn't put too much into the don't touch part. Perhaps the book is too old to be of much help. It had been given to me by one of my aunts before I left home."

Elizabeth pondered. "You may be right, Rose." She closed the book. "I wish I knew what to expect. If we are to court, then I will wait and see what happens. It may be kind of interesting to see what he does and where he takes me."

Rose stopped what she was doing. "When you marry Noah, which I hope occurs, I will be the only one here. Does that mean I have to take over the boarding house?"

Elizabeth stood. "Oh Rose, let's not think that far ahead. Besides, you want to become the reverend's wife, don't you?"

Rose smiled. "I do."

"Well, then, let's cross that bridge when we come to it. Who knows, Rose, perhaps we'll be having a double wedding."

The two giggled together, realizing how much they truly wanted to be married to the men they loved. Elizabeth knew Rose was deeply in love with her reverend. She was in love with Noah, too, except her heart was filled with a distrust that she hadn't been able to shake off.

How was she supposed to be able to ever trust him fully and completely?

Chapter 4

“Be there for a friend when he needs you”
-the code of the west

*E*lizabeth had been scurrying around in the kitchen helping Rose finish dinner. The chicken and dumplings were almost ready to be placed on the table. To top it off, Rose had made a delicious green bean casserole. Elizabeth set the plate of fresh bread and a picture of milk in the middle of the table.

“She rang the bell that sat on the end table in the parlor. “Dinner is being served,” she announced.

Two of the guests were already in the parlor reading the paper. They quickly sat at the dining table to wait patiently for the others to join in.

There was a strict time table in the boarding house. Dinner was at six and if you were late, the others were entitled to eat your share. It was a strict rule that had everyone at the table in a matter of seconds after Elizabeth had rung the bell. Doors opened and shut from upstairs, while footsteps sounded on the stairs as the rest of the guests made it in time.

Except for the one guest who was missing.

Elizabeth peeked out the window to see if by chance he was making his way up the street.

“Shall we pray,” Rose prompted.

“May as well, I don’t believe our last guest is coming,” Elizabeth told her. “Carry on,” she said, disappointed that Noah didn’t make it to the table on time. She wanted to save him a plate but the rules were strict. Now he’d have to go eat at the café if they were still open

when he returned.

If he returned.

Elizabeth forced a smile on her face as she went to the table for the evening prayer. Bowing her head, she asked Rose to do the honors. Rose would have to get used to this if she were planning to become a reverend's wife.

"Lord, thank you for the food we are about to eat. May you bless each and every one of us at this table and help us to love one another, regardless of our weaknesses. In Jesus name, I pray, Amen."

And bring home our loved ones safely. Elizabeth added those words to her own silent prayer.

Throughout the dinner, Elizabeth tried to smile and make small talk even if she was constantly trying to look out the front parlor window. He had been gone since this morning and not a word since.

Rose kept watching her and tried to cheer her up. "I'm so excited to announce there is a dessert social this evening, everyone. If you take the main street to the empty lot close to the mercantile, there will be tables and chairs set up there. There is a twenty-five cent admission fee and the proceeds will go towards building the church. They will also be auctioning off cakes. I made one for the event so get out your wallets and purses and help the church if you can. Each dessert will be auctioned off piece by piece, so if you loved this cake, there may be another one in your future."

Elizabeth was proud of Rose. She was becoming a staunch supporter of Mill Ridge. She would make the perfect preacher's wife.

Jacob, one of the boarders, moaned out loud with glee. "Another piece! I'm counting my money because I would love to win another delicious piece of cake. Can we go now and get a seat up front?"

Rose laughed, her cheeks blushing. "Of course you can. You may want to hurry since it will be starting in less than an hour. You tell Reverend Pope that Rose said to place you at a table closest to the auction stage."

The others left the table to get ready for the social. There wasn't a whole lot of entertainment in Mill Ridge so it was exciting to see everyone want to enjoy the entertainment. Elizabeth forced herself to

go.

She had been looking forward to being asked to go by Noah, as she had a hunch it was the reason he had gone to Wichita Falls to speak to Miss Addie so quickly this morning.

Elizabeth had stepped out on to the porch to send the others off towards the social. After speaking with a few of the boarders, she came inside, distracted as she helped Rose to clean up the kitchen.

“What’s wrong, Elizabeth? Is it Noah’s absence? Don’t let him get you down. I’m sure there is a reason he hasn’t returned yet. Maybe there was some serious business he had to take care of in Wichita Falls. Maybe he didn’t know this was so important to you.”

“I don’t know what to think, Rose. Our boarder, Randy Martin, who works at the livery, told me Noah had saddled up his horse and said he’d be back in time for the dessert social when he found out there was going to be one tonight. He told Randy he planned to dance the evening away with me on his arm all night long.”

“Perhaps something happened, although I’m sure it is nothing bad,” Rose said quickly, realizing that she may have scared Elizabeth with those words. “Really, I think he’ll show up, give him time.”

Elizabeth nodded. “You may be right, let’s finish up and head down there.” Even though it wasn’t going to be fun knowing she was going without Noah, a deep-rooted resentment began to take place in her heart where she had started to soften up to him, alongside a fear that something had happened. Why had she believed he had changed?

Taking a deep breath, Elizabeth gathered up the cake and left the boarding house, holding her head up high. She would not let his absence ruin her evening. It wasn’t often they had these types of gatherings and she was going to enjoy every single moment.

If she could keep the tears from falling.

It wasn’t going to be easy.

Whether he knew it or not, Noah Holloway had once again broken her heart.

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“It’s been six hours. How long do you think he’ll stay in there?” Sheriff Nightengale looked at Noah with a frown.

“No telling. Perhaps we should force him out.”

“Good idea. How do you suppose we do that?”

Noah didn’t like pushing the bandit out in the open but if he were going to get back to join in on the dessert social this evening, he had to think of something and fast.

His morning had been going well. He had gotten permission from Miss Addie to court Elizabeth and when he had stopped to pick some wild flowers for her, a man on a horse had sped through the gully where he stood with a bunch of flowers in his hand.

The Sheriff had been right behind the man in hot pursuit. When he saw Noah standing there watching the scene in front of him, he called out. “You gonnna stand there holding a pile of wilting flowers or help me, Texas Ranger?”

Noah had frowned. “I’m no longer a ranger, how many times do I have to tell people?”

The sheriff had slowed down to a trot. “Maybe so, but the man who rode by you just robbed a family heading west. It’s all the money they have to their name and I intend to get it back. I happened to come upon the robbery and have been in hot pursuit since. You can call yourself retired or whatever, but he is slipping away and I could use some help.” With those words, the Sheriff of Mill Ridge slapped his horse on the side and took off after the bandit.

Noah growled. Stuffing the flowers in his saddlebags, he had jumped on his horse, following behind the Sheriff.

Now here they were, at a rustic cabin on the outskirts of Wichita Falls, waiting for the man inside to make a move. They had to be careful if he had a hostage. No one wanted to see an innocent person hurt. They had to be sure. “He says he has a prisoner inside. I’m not sure I believe him.”

Noah pondered. “We may as well find out.” He began making his way towards the far side of the cabin. Staying low, he came around the side of the structure, hitching himself up onto the porch before swinging his whole body onto the low roof. Noah was good at

sneaking around without making much noise, even on a rooftop.

As soon as he reached the chimney, Noah took off his duster and slid it over top the opening. There had been a small fire going as small puffs of smoke indicated someone had started it awhile ago. That's what made Noah wonder if there was another person inside or if this was the bandit's home and he had the home fires already burning before he went out to rob a poor family.

They were about to find out the answer. Sliding back down from the roof, his booted feet hit the ground hard. Noah righted himself before moving quietly around the south side of the cabin. When the bandit was forced out of the cabin, the sheriff would be in the direct line of vision and Noah would come up from behind.

It seemed too easy. Noah always worried when things were too simple.

When the smoke had no place to go but inside the small cabin, the figure inside began to cough and gag. He stumbled around inside, knocking things to the floor. Noah watched from a small window along the side of the house where he was hiding. It didn't appear there was anyone else involved. After a quick glance around the room, Noah noticed a revolver lying on the end of a small table. The bandit hadn't picked it up right away. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and tied it around his lower face but the smoke kept coming, filling up the room.

Noah was no longer able to see him. He slid against the side of the cabin, working his way to the front so he'd be able to sneak up behind the bandit the moment he fled the smoking room.

He nodded to the Sheriff, who was hiding a few yards away behind a tree, ready to fire if need be.

The two worked well together. Noah wondered for a moment if the Sheriff would need a deputy. He shook his head, reminding himself he no longer wanted to be in this kind of work, even if it did fire up his blood at times. No, a ranch with the woman he loved was in his future. Any thoughts of continuing to work as a lawmaker fled from his mind the moment the door swung open.

The bandit, half bent over, came out, gagging. He knew he was

caught. He raised his hands up in the air, coughing and spitting.

Sheriff Nightingale began to creep forward.

That's when Noah got a close look at the bandit's backside. He was hiding a small pistol in his waistband.

Noah held up his hand, trying to warn the sheriff.

The sheriff had eyes only for the bandit. Noah sighed, he knew it had been too easy.

One of them were going to be in the direct line of fire. The sheriff's wife was about to have a baby, he needed to stay out of the direct line of fire.

That left Noah to surprise the bandit.

Although it could go either way.

No telling how good a shot the man was.

Noah grinned. He knew how good a shot he was.

Never was a time he hadn't hit his target.

"Sheriff, get back out of the way!" Noah hollered in his direction before moving so quickly the bandit jumped.

He went for his gun, turning his back completely on the sheriff and pointed it at Noah. "Hold on there, law man. You trying to sneak up on me?"

That got Noah's goat. "I ain't a law man any more. Wish people would stop saying that!"

"Whatever you are, I ain't going to use this on anyone. You just scared the daylights out of me. I don't want no gunfire!"

"Then put the gun down."

"Okay."

He bent over and placed the gun on the ground.

Noah kept his eye on the bandit. Again, too easy. "Turn around. Face the sheriff."

Someone coughed. Noah heard a small voice gasping and sobbing. "Is there someone inside?"

The bandit, his hands facing the sky, shook his head. "No, that's my sister. I sent her through the escape in the floorboards to get away but she didn't listen." He turned his face to the little girl crying by the far end of the cabin. "I told you to run away. Now, why didn't you listen

to me?"

"I want my mama!"

The bandit's face fell. "She's gone, button. She died and went to heaven."

Noah dared a glance at the Sheriff. The look on his face was of surprise. He hadn't expected to see a child, either.

"What's her name?" Noah asked.

The man looked at Noah. "None of your beeswax. You leave her alone." His blonde hair hung part-way in his eyes.

At a closer look, the bandit didn't looked like a grown man but much younger. "How old are you, boy?"

"I ain't no boy. I'm a man."

Noah didn't have time to pussyfoot around. He wanted to get back to Elizabeth. "Then if call yourself a man, you can be hung like one for robbing those settlers. How old are you?"

The bandit's face fell, his eyes widened and the skin on his cheeks drained of all color. "Hung?"

"That's right," the sheriff jumped in. "How old are you, son?"

"Fourteen."

The two men exchanged glances. Noah spoke up. "What happened here?"

The boy was terrified and let it all out. "My mama went to be with the Lord a few weeks ago. She fell sick and nothing we did could help her. We used up all we had from the garden but it wasn't enough. I'm sorry to have stolen from those settlers, but I was desperate. I don't want my sister to get sick and die, too. I'm the man now."

"Where's your Pa?" Noah had a hunch he already knew.

"He went hunting, left me in charge. Haven't seen him since."

"How long ago was that?"

"More than a year ago. We tried to make it, we did up until mama got sick."

The sheriff spoke up. "Son, you know I'm going to have to arrest you for stealing. You'll have to give the money back to the settlers. I'm afraid you and your sister will have to come with us back to Mill Ridge."

Noah had to agree. They would die out here on the prairie with no means to get food or work.

The boy panicked. His bottom lip quivered even though he tried hard to conceal his fear. “I’m gonna hang?”

Noah wondered if the sheriff would instil a fear in the boy so strong he’d never steal again because it was exactly what he wanted to do.

The sheriff stared at the boy for a few minutes. The boy, his hands still in the air, stared back, even if he were scared witless.

The sheriff finally answered. “I’m gonna tell you what we’ll do, boy. First you tell me your name?”

“It’s William. William Jackson. This here is my sister, Katherine, but we call her Katie. Please don’t harm her? I promised my ma I’d take good care of her.”

The sheriff walked over to the boy, his gun back in his holster. “Put your hands down, William. Let’s go inside and put out the fire and close the cabin up. You promise to not try to run?”

“Yes, sir.”

The two walked back inside while Noah stood there, a little girl in his view. She had to be about four or five years of age. Dirty tears slid down her face, her little eyes fearful.

He slowly made his way to stand in front of her. Getting down on one knee, Noah chose his words carefully, not wanting to scare the child any more than she already was. “Katie, my name is Noah.”

The girl locked her eyes on him. “I want my mama!” Her little hands were fisted at her sides.

“Now, now, your mama is safe in heaven. The sheriff and I are going to take you and your brother to a nice place and get you something to eat.” He reached in his vest for a handkerchief, pulling it out and dabbing the tears. She flinched once but then allowed him to wipe away the wetness from her cheeks.

“I am hungry.”

“I have an apple in my saddlebag. May I offer it to you?”

She nodded.

“As soon as we get the cabin closed up, we’ll get you an apple. You can ride with me back to Mill Ridge.”

Katie ran inside to find her brother.

The unlikely foursome began their way back to Mill Ridge. Noah was in the lead, little Katie sitting stiff as a board in front of him. She was hungrily eating the apple he had placed in her hand. The juice was dripping down, leaving spots all over the front of her dress.

The sheriff had tied the boys hands behind his back to transport him to Mill Ridge. Even though Noah doubted he would try anything stupid with his sister along, they had to take precautions. The boy had robbed once, sometimes it led to a lifetime of crime.

Noah hoped they could reform the boy before that happened. They were in a dilemma. Would the settlers, who were instructed to wait on the sheriff, demand the boy be tried for his sins?

Even though the law wasn't clear here in the west, if the townsfolk wanted the boy punished, there wasn't much the rest would do.

This crime was clearly an act of desperation. If they let the boy get away with it, he may commit another crime. There had to be a lesson taught. Noah didn't think a prison would help, not after losing his parents, but he had to pay for his sin.

Mill Ridge was the sheriff's jurisdiction. Noah was no longer a law man and any decisions made were left to Mill Ridge and the powers that be.

Glad he didn't have to make those major decisions any longer, his mind strayed to Elizabeth.

The dessert social was likely to be in full swing by now. He hated the fact he didn't make it to ask her there and hoped and prayed she hadn't been invited by anyone else.

Was she even attending the social?

How angry would she be when he hadn't come back from Wichita Falls?

The road ahead began to clear as Mill Ridge came into view.

Guess he was about to find out.

Chapter 5

"Remove your guns before sitting at the dining table"
-the code of the west

*E*lizabeth groaned. As a lady she tried hard to be polite when one of the men asked her to dance during the musical part of the social. Even if her heart wasn't into dancing, she was determined not to fall down that black hole of doom and gloom ever again. It had been hard crawling back out after Noah had left her high and dry the first time so long ago. Elizabeth would hold her head up and get through the evening without Noah.

Two fiddler's had joined in to stir up the crowd. The announcer encouraged the men to ask the ladies for a dance and it wasn't long before everyone had a dance partner. It was a wonderful social, with rows of tables lined up along the perimeter, along with baked goods being served at the far end of the line. Lemonade and berry punch could be had by dipping a ladle from a big round bowl into small cups.

Earlier in the day, Miss Addie had sent six of the girls in her boarding house that were rescued by the townsfolk of Wichita Falls to help with the social. They would spend the night at the boarding house in Mill Ridge, doubling up with Rose and Elizabeth if need be. There was no lack of partners this evening as men were happy to dance with them.

All in all it was going well. Except for the one man who hadn't shown his face. Anger welled up from deep inside. At first, she thought maybe something had happened because he seemed so

excited this morning. But as the day wore on, she knew he had forgotten her again. Elizabeth kicked herself for trusting in him again. How dare he look her in the face and tell her he'd be back, only to not return when he knew there was going to be activities this evening?

The mix of emotions would drive her insane if she allowed it to keep her in such a dark mood. When a rather handsome, tall man bowed and asked for a dance, Elizabeth decided not to hesitate. She found herself out on the floor, dancing and laughing to a lively tune. He may not be Noah, but she'd make the best of her situation.

Elizabeth was still smiling at something the tall man named Richard had said. He twirled her around, lifting her arm up causing Elizabeth to laugh along with all the others who were enjoying the dancing.

Her face fell when she spotted the two lone riders slowly making their way down the street. The fiddler's music faded and stilled as everyone at the social slowly turned when the men on horseback came to a stop.

"What's the sheriff got there?" one of the fiddler's asked no one in particular.

"Why, would you look there. A young'un and a little wee'un. They're all caked with dirt and soot."

Elizabeth was ashamed of herself when she realized something bad had happened. She hurried over to the men, along with Rose, Reverend Pope and two of the other ladies.

"Elizabeth," Noah called out over the commotion the others were making.

She hurried to his side, looking up to see a small child, no more than four years old on his lap, hanging on to him for dear life. Her fist went to her mouth. Elizabeth's heart melted at the sight.

Her anger at him dissipated in an instant. Maybe she was hurt and angry but this wasn't the time or place to confront him. She pushed her dark fears to the back of her mind and reached up for the child.

Noah looked at her with relief. He placed the child in her arms. "Do you have her?"

Elizabeth nodded.

“She’s exhausted. I’m not sure if she’ll wake up. It’s been a long night.”

He was wrong.

The child stirred in her arms. Her little eyes popped open. When the little one realized it wasn’t Noah holding her, she struggled for an instant.

“Shh, I won’t hurt you,” Elizabeth told her.

“Are you a mama?” she asked.

“I’m not a mama. I’m Elizabeth. Who are you?”

“Katherine, but my brother says it’s OK to call me Katie.”

Elizabeth smiled at the child. “Katie, it is then.”

“I’m hungry!” she told the small crowd that had gathered around the riders.

Elizabeth had the power to fix her hunger. “I have just the thing for you, young Katie. How about we go to the dessert social and have something to eat and drink?”

“Dessert? You have dessert?”

“Yes, Katie, we do. You can have anything you like, how about that?”

The little blonde hair shook as her head nodded up and down so fast Elizabeth hoped she wouldn’t get an ache in her head.

Then as quickly as she cried out, the little one got quiet. Elizabeth’s heart wrenched watching her emotional state. “What’s wrong, Katie?”

Her little lip quivered. “William said we have no food. How can we eat when its all gone?”

“Oh, child.” Elizabeth pulled her close, wrapping her arms around the child and began to walk back to the social. She looked over her shoulder to find Noah watching her. His eyes held something so strong and passionate she almost looked away.

Then the moment passed and he turned to speak with Sheriff Nightingale.

“Don’t take my sister.”

The boy’s imploring voice stopped Elizabeth in her trek across the grass. She turned to find a young man, no older than fifteen at the most, staring at her in horror.

Elizabeth retraced her steps until she stood in front of the Sheriff's horse, and stared up at the young man. "Please," he begged, his cheeks rosy red. "We've never been apart."

She noticed the boy's hands were tied. Elizabeth addressed the sheriff, who until this point, didn't have much to say. "Why is he restrained?"

"It's a long story, ma'am. He intends to right his mistakes immediately and when he does, I'll set him free. He would like to stay with his sister. It would be best if he can do so."

"I certainly hope so. We'll put the two up for the night since I doubt they have a place to stay."

Sheriff Nightingale tipped his hat. "Much obliged, Miss Elizabeth. Did you happen to see a wagon come by here earlier?"

"You mean Mr. and Mrs. Walker?"

"I believe that is correct. I asked them to meet me at my office but I don't see their wagon out front."

"It's because their wagon is in the livery. Townsfolk took pity on their situation since they were robbed. Right now, they are sitting at the table over yonder having some cake and enjoying the night's festivities until you came back. I believe there was room made in the back of the livery for them to sleep tonight since my boarding house is full."

It occurred to Elizabeth these two may have something to do with the settlers getting robbed. When she glanced at the boy, his face turned pale at the mention of the settlers.

"Miss Elizabeth, would you kindly ask the settlers to meet me at the sheriff's office."

"Certainly, Sheriff, just as soon as I get little Katie here settled and her tummy filled."

"Much obliged."

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Elizabeth settled the little girl on her lap, slicing a large piece of cake along with a cup of berry punch. She watched in amusement as

Katie packed her mouth full. “Slow down, child, you will get a belly ache.”

Katie looked up to stare at Elizabeth. “A belly ache! Will it hurt?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes, Katie, very much. You must take your time, slow down and chew your food.”

Katie began to pout, her bottom lip sticking out. A tear dripped down the side of her face. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled, her mouth full and her tears falling all over the place.

“Oh, sweet girl, it’s okay.” Elizabeth dabbed the tears with a cloth napkin.

Katie swallowed her food. “Will it hurt like my tummy does when we don’t have any food to eat? Is it like that kind of hurt?”

Elizabeth’s heart broke at the thought of this sweet girl having to do without. “Katie, how long have you had to go without food?”

She shrugged, popping another spoonful of cake in her mouth. After chewing slower this time, Katie swallowed and smiled. She reached down and rubbed her belly. “It worked! No belly ache!”

“That’s good, Katie. Finish up your cake. I’ll make sure to take a slice along for you and your brother for tomorrow.”

“I get more!”

“Why, yes, of course you can have more.”

Katie threw her arms around Elizabeth’s neck and clung on for dear life. “Thank you!”

That was how Noah found the two. He slipped onto the bench alongside Elizabeth. “I could use a slice of that cake myself. Haven’t eaten since this morning.”

Elizabeth wanted to tell him to help himself. She wanted to stay angry and hold a grudge but when she gazed at the sweet child in her arms, she wasn’t about to refuse. She crooked her head and looked down at Katie who was sticking a finger in the icing and licking it off.

“Katie, I’m going to set you on the bench alongside Mr. Holloway so I can get him a slice of cake, too.”

Katie squealed with delight. Her blonde curls began to bob once more as Elizabeth stood up. She gazed at Noah and her face fell. “Noah Holloway!”

“Uh oh, what did I do?” He turned, his eyes drained and looking dog-tired, but she wasn’t backing down on this one.

“I know you must be exhausted from today’s activities but you’ve got about thirty seconds to remove that gun from your belt! Don’t you know the unspoken rule?”

Noah sighed. He ran a hand over his brow, relieved. “Yes, ma’am,” he told her, standing up and leaving the table. In a few minutes he returned minus the gun. “My apologies. That never happens, I wasn’t thinking.”

When he sat back down, she went to get him his cake. Ladling out some lemonade, she filled a large cup with the fresh liquid. When Elizabeth returned, she noticed the little one was leaning against his side, her eyes drifting shut.

She set the plate and cup on the table in front of Noah, taking a seat beside Katie. Noah ate his fill while the little one slept away. It was a sight to see. He would make a wonderful father.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth.” His gentle words warmed her heart.

“Please, save it for later. I don’t want to ruin this moment.”

He followed her gaze to the sleeping child. “She needs a mother,” he said, keeping his voice low.

“What happened to hers?”

“She’s in heaven,” he told her quietly so as not to awaken Katie.

“That’s so sad. I’m sorry. We should get her to a bed.”

Noah pushed the empty plate aside. He chugged his drink and wiped a hand across his mouth. Elizabeth laughed out loud when he was about to let out a burp until he realized he was sitting at a table with ladies present.

He looked at her and raised a brow. “Let’s get this child to the boarding house. I’ll carry her if you are finished here.”

“The other ladies can finish up. It looks like most people are reluctant to leave. We don’t often have festivities like this. Excuse me while I speak with Rose and the reverend.”

When Elizabeth returned, Noah easily scooped the child in his arms. She barely stirred as he walked back to the boarding house with Katie in his arms and Elizabeth at his side.

Most of the lights were off in the buildings lining the street. Even the mercantile was closed. The only place open was the saloon and Elizabeth didn't think it ever closed down. "It's a beautiful night," she said, trying to make conversation.

"That it is. Look up, the stars are so close I bet you can reach out and touch them."

Elizabeth smiled. "It's because the sky is so clear. I've never tried to."

Noah grinned, shifting the child in his arms. "Go on, reach out, try to touch one."

"That's silly. You can't touch a star." As she said those words, her hand went above her head. Of course, there was no way she would catch a star but the thought she did try made her giggle.

"I like when you laugh, Elizabeth. It makes the whole world right again."

Elizabeth blushed. His words made her catch her breath. Every time she wanted to be furious with him, it caused her to love him a little more.

The things he did, the people he helped, she realized in that particular moment the world was so much bigger than her. Noah was a kind man who had given up his life with her to hunt down the men who murdered their families. If she had known it at the time, she'd have waited for him instead of leaving as a mail order bride. It was time she told him so.

The boarding house came into view. "Let's get her settled in my room and then we need to talk, Noah. I have a few words to say."

He stopped, a worried look on his face. "I'm not sure I want to hear what you have to say unless it is good news. I've had my share of bad stuff today, Elizabeth."

"I promise, it's nothing bad."

"You sure?"

"The sooner you stop asking questions and put little Katie to bed, the sooner we can talk."

Noah grinned, turned and followed Elizabeth inside. She showed him where to settle the child and poured them both a glass of

lemonade.

“Let’s sit on the porch. I’m sure the streets will stay quiet for awhile since everyone is enjoying the festivities.”

“Thanks for letting the child stay here.” Noah waited until she was seated and sat beside her. The high back bench was made special by a company back east. They shipped it just last week. It rocked back and forth and was big enough for two.

Elizabeth pushed away with her foot as the two swayed back and forth, enjoying the quiet. She knew she had to start the conversation but it was so peaceful now, so serene, she didn’t want to ruin the silence.

It was funny how they didn’t have to say a word, yet enjoyed each others company. When Noah spoke, it made her jump, she was so lost in her thoughts.

“What did you want to discuss, Elizabeth?”

“Us.”

“I’m listening.”

Elizabeth let out a deep sigh. She turned to Noah, her hand on her heart. “I’ve loved you, Noah, it seems like since forever. I thought we would get married and have children and start that ranch you wanted.”

Noah sat up. “I’m sorry, Elizabeth. Things changed when our parents were -”

She placed a finger over his mouth. “Shh, darling. I want you to hear me out.”

He nodded, concerned.

She placed a hand on his cheek. “I was so angry with you for dumping me when I needed you most. I wish now you had confided in me what your plans were but I do understand you felt I would be in danger.”

“I’d have died if anything had happened to you. Elizabeth, you are all I have left. You are my whole life. I’m so sorry to have hurt you.”

“I want to forgive you because a woman’s heart when torn in two is unforgiving up to a point. The grief, the hurt and anger at losing our families drove you to go after them. I’m proud of how you became a

Texas Ranger."

"I left you high and dry, I know and I ask for forgiveness. Staying behind while those murderers ran free would make me less of a man. There was no way I could live a life with you until they were caught and answered for their crimes."

Elizabeth smiled. "I do understand, I think. I want to anyway. Forgive me, Noah, for being selfish. There's so much out there, just look at the poor child you helped today. She has no one, except her brother. What happened?"

Noah groaned. "The boy robbed the settlers because they've been without food or means for almost two weeks prior. He was trying to provide for Katie. The mother done passed away and the father's been gone hunting well over a year now. I doubt he'll be coming back."

Her hand caught his. "Will he be punished? Robbery is a terrible crime."

Noah shook his head. "I'm not sure, depends on what Sheriff Nightingale decides. If the settlers find it in their hearts to forgive the boy, he may be let go with a warning. I'd like to see him pay for his sin with some good, hard work to benefit the town. If they let him walk away, he's liable to do it again."

Elizabeth nodded. "I tend to agree. Let's talk to the sheriff. He can stay here and earn his keep. I can always use another hand around here."

"I also think he should have a father figure around him. I've been looking at a nice spread a few miles from here I'm fixing to buy. He can help with some hard work, jail isn't going to help him at this point. The boy needs to keep busy."

Elizabeth's heart began to beat faster. "Does this mean what I think it does? You'll be staying here, in Mill Ridge?"

"I came for you, Elizabeth. I wanted to whisk you away, take you back home at first. When I saw the land surrounding this town, I knew we can never go back. Our home is going to be here. I'm going to marry you like I promised and make you a home right here on the prairie."

Tears slid down her face as she sobbed. Noah gathered her in his

arms. “I’m so afraid. What if you leave again? What if you never come back? There are greater things in this world than us. Look at what you just did, how you helped a small child.”

“I’m done with that life, Elizabeth. I promise.”

She looked at him, seeing the truth in his eyes. Yet, she knew he would never turn away if someone needed him. It took all of her emotions to say her next words. “I don’t want you to change, Noah. I love you for who you are and that means if you are needed somewhere, if you have to help the sheriff again, I won’t try to stop you.”

“I love you, Elizabeth.”

At his words, she wrapped her arms around him, clinging to him, knowing he would always be her one true love. “I’ve never stopped loving you, Noah,” she whispered.

Chapter 6

"Defend yourself whenever necessary"
-the code of the west

When the two heard a noise from the front door, a sleepy-eyed little girl stood there yawning, listening to their conversation. “I love you, Elizabeth,” she repeated.

The two began to laugh. Elizabeth whisked the child up, setting her on her lap, stroking her back as Katie fell right back to sleep in her arms. “Is there no other relatives?”

Noah shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps the boy may be able to tell us more. Look up, the sheriff is headed our way with him in tow.”

Sheriff Nightingale spoke to the boy in quiet tones before they stopped in front of the boarding house. “Noah, Elizabeth, William here has a few words to say.”

Elizabeth was relieved to see the boy’s hands were no longer tied with a rawhide strap. “Please, go on.”

“Ma’am, sir, I’m sorry to have caused so much trouble. I didn’t mean to steal, well, I did mean to but it was only to feed my sister and me. When I stole from the settlers, I figured they had enough to share. Now I’m sorry to say I had taken all their provisions that left them high and dry.”

Noah stood. “Have you given their money back?”

The boy nodded, his head hung down in shame. “Yes, sir. They accepted their money back and asked me to make sure never to steal again. I sweared to them I’d never do it again.”

“Swore, William, you swore you’ll never do it again.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You can call me Miss Elizabeth, like everyone else does.”

“Yes, ma’am, Miss Elizabeth.”

Noah and her exchanged looks. The boy seemed as if he were deeply ashamed. But he had to learn there were consequences to any crime. “It seems the settlers were very forgiving, young man. You are indeed lucky to not be put in jail.”

The boy nodded so fast, Elizabeth almost reached out and hugged him.

Noah spoke up then. “I don’t think you should be forgiven so easy, son. Now before you despair, the sheriff and I talked about this. If Miss Elizabeth here will give you room and board, you can work with me or the sheriff, depending on who needs you the most. I’d say six months of hard work will satisfy your crime. What do you think, William?”

“What about our cabin? It will be empty. What if Pa comes back and we’re not there?”

This was getting more difficult. Elizabeth felt the need to speak up. “William, your father has been gone a long time. I don’t know that he’ll be back.” She tried to be as gentle as possible but he had to face the reality of what may have happened at some point.

Noah agreed, although he offered an alternative. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do, William. In the morning, we’ll go back to the cabin, leave a note for your Pa and then ask some of the neighboring farmers if they saw him. We can leave notices in Wichita Falls and send telegrams to a few other towns, including Dallas. If he is there, perhaps someone knows something.”

The boy seemed surprised. “You would do that for me? I’ve wanted to search farther away but I didn’t dare leave my sister overnight.”

Elizabeth took the boy and gave him a hug. His tall, thin frame was as stiff as the front door when she wrapped her arms around him. He slowly softened up. “William, you have a chance to find out for sure. Take the offer and let me take care of Katie. She’ll be in safe hands, I promise.”

The boy didn’t speak. His bottom lip quivered as he tried to act like

a man and keep from sobbing. Elizabeth turned away then, knowing he'd be embarrassed if she saw him cry.

"I'll go along," the sheriff offered. "Besides, Betsy can keep Katie occupied. They are around the same age."

"Who is Betsy?" William asked.

"She's Ellie and the doctor's daughter. Sophie keeps her while the doctor is in town working. He comes two days a week and now they are going on a week away to a physician's seminar in Chicago so Sophie offered to have Betsy stay with her. She'll be more than happy to have someone over to play with Betsy. They weren't able to come to the social because my wife wasn't up to it in her condition and Betsy won't leave her side. They are like two peas in a pod." The sheriff's eyes glowed when he talked about his wife and her condition. Soon, she would be so busy with a new bundle of joy.

"I'd be delighted to take Katie over in the morning after breakfast. Do yo think Betsy will want to come over here to play and give Sophie a break?"

"I'll let her know you are stopping by." The sheriff tipped his hat. "Now if you don't mind, I'd like to get some of that cake and deliver a slice to my wife."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Elizabeth told him. "William, follow me, please. I'll show you where you can sleep."

"The boy can bunk with me," Noah offered.

"That's kind of you, Noah. I was going to put them in my room but it would be better to have him with you."

She took Katie back inside, covering her up in Elizabeth's own bed. The girl was exhausted, her eyes didn't open even when William gave her a kiss on the cheek goodnight.

After showing William where to go, Elizabeth made her way back out to the porch. She watched with amusement as the sheriff hurried up the street to their little bungalow at the edge of town, his hands full of cake. A small light shone from the window of their little cabin. She stood on the porch, gazing into the night, content for some reason even after all that had happened.

Noah came up behind her. When she didn't turn at first, she felt his

arms around her waist. She leaned back. “It’s been quite the evening.”

“I promise, Elizabeth, you and I will be like that. I will build our home on the land I plan to purchase tomorrow and make you my bride. I won’t let you go this time.”

She turned in his arms. “I have no intention of letting you go, nor will I tolerate you leaving me for long periods of time. If you want to help others, you help the folks here in Mill Ridge, just like you promised William.”

He leaned in, placing a loving kiss on her lips. Elizabeth closed her eyes, enveloping herself in his soft kiss. When he pulled away, he smiled. “That’s not what you told me before. You said you wouldn’t stop me from helping others.”

She lifted her face, placing a small kiss on his chin. “I lied, Noah Holloway. Besides, a lady can change her mind.”

He grinned. “I think we’ll have enough to do with William and Katie to keep us busy for a long time. If no one makes a claim for them, we will have to finish raising them. Do you agree?”

“I had that thought in my head as well, former ranger.”

“Former ranger, huh?” He nuzzled her neck, causing her to giggle. Her laughter echoed in the still night.

“You heard me right. We’d better go in, this isn’t proper.”

Noah raised a brow. “I don’t plan on ever being proper with you, Elizabeth. Besides, I want the whole territory to know you are going to be my wife, especially that long, tall fellow you were dancing with earlier.”

“He was just a dance partner.”

“Well, you are mine now. There won’t be no dancing with anyone but me.” He proved it by swaying back and forth as if they were a couple on the dance floor.

She pushed him back. “Noah Holloway, you still haven’t proposed!”

“Well, then, it’s high time I did!” He got down on one knee, placing his hat on his knee and took her left hand. “Elizabeth, my love, I am asking for your hand in marriage. I love you with all my heart and soul. What do you say?”

Elizabeth placed a finger on her chin. “Hmmm, well, sir. You are

kind of cute."

"Cute! Don't let anyone hear you say that, my reputation will be shattered!"

She giggled out loud. "You are the most handsome man in my life and yes, I will marry you!" The palms of her hands cupped his face. She bent down to give him a kiss when he pulled her down on him.

"I love you, Elizabeth."

She tried to move away then gave up when his strong arms held fast. "I've always loved you, Noah. Now, please help me up. As my fiancé, you need to practice some finery."

He pushed up from his knee to set her upright. As she brushed off her gown, he wrapped his arms around her again. "Finery, eh? Is that like being a proper gentleman?"

She nodded but when he looked at her so seriously, she sobered. "What is it, Noah?"

"I promise to love and honor you for the rest of our lives. Elizabeth, forgive me for all I've done to cause you pain. I know we were fooling around, but, I want you to know I won't take our marriage lightly. This man promises he will never deliberately leave again. Not unless you are by my side."

She had no words. Tears of joy ran down her face. He held her there on the porch for a long time before they bid each other goodnight.

Elizabeth was the happiest woman alive.

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"Betsy, thank you for allowing Katie to play." The two girls stared at each other for a moment and then both began to speak at once. They ran off to a corner of the room where some wooden toys and dolls were on a bench.

"I'm glad to have someone to keep her occupied here so I can get some work done. Hello, we've met before in passing. I am Sophie Nightingale. Would you care for a cup of hot coffee?"

"Certainly. I'm Elizabeth Sheldon. It's a pleasure to meet you."

The two ladies sat down for coffee while the girls played to their hearts content.

"When is the baby due?"

Sophie laughed. "Soon, I hope. I watch Betsy two days a week while her folks are working but I've run out of things to keep her occupied in my condition. It's getting hard to get around now and it's so warm during the day. I'm just glad the evenings have cooled down some."

While the two chatted, Elizabeth's mind wandered. She heard Noah and William leave at the crack of dawn, even before breakfast. It made her wonder if he wasn't being a bit hard on the boy. After all, a hearty breakfast was pertinent to a good day of work.

Forcing herself to pay attention, Elizabeth offered to help Sophie get her work done. "I'd be happy to help you with your chores."

Sophie began to dust the small home, while Elizabeth cleaned the laundry and hung it outside to dry. Sophie followed her outside, content to hand it out while Elizabeth hung each piece. "I'm exhausted from the time I get out of bed in the morning," Sophie admitted. "Thanks for offering to help. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do the laundry. This baby is a little fighter. Keeping me up most of the night squirming around and kicking like a mule." Sophie joked but Elizabeth could see the dark circles under her eyes. Taking care of a four year old was a lot of work, even if it was only for two days a week, let alone cleaning and cooking with a big belly.

"Are you sure there is just one baby in there?" The sheriff's wife was huge, perhaps someone needed to take a second look.

She laughed out loud. "It feels like there are ten babies inside, but the good doctor from Wichita Falls assured me there was one baby."

"How about if I take Betsy for lunch so you can get some rest. And, don't bother to make dinner. Rose and I are planning some chicken and dumplings again and will bring you a hot dish to feed everyone when we drop off Betsy. Is that a deal?"

Elizabeth thought her new friend was going to cry. "I'm so honored. You know, there aren't any other women here. It's hard to live in a town with mostly men."

“I agree. That’s why we have to stick together. We will help each other. Right now, Katie needs a friend to keep her busy. She’s lost her parents and her home, it is so sad.”

Sophie nodded. “At least she has you to see her through. I’ll take you up on the offer. I want to return the favor as soon as I’m able.”

Elizabeth had a feeling it would be a long time until Sophie would be feeling up to taking on two children. The poor woman looked as if she was ready to burst. “How long until the baby is due?”

“In a few weeks, I’m told. I wish it would happen now, I just want this over with.”

“I’m sure.” Watching Sophie suffer didn’t help Elizabeth at all. Did she want to have children of her own? Maybe they should just take in homeless orphans, like William and Katie.

When Sophie saw her face, she gave Elizabeth a hug. “Oh, honey, don’t let this deter you from having babies of your own. I would never trade having my own child for anything in the world. It puts joy on my husband’s face to know he’s going to be a father. At night, when it’s the two of us, he lays his hand across my belly to feel the baby move.”

Elizabeth saw the delight springing forth. Perhaps she would reconsider having a child of her own. But for now, the two orphans would have to do. “I must go get some work done at home, Sophie. I’ll take Betsy. Don’t worry, if you want to come check on her, just let yourself in.”

Elizabeth had a houseful. The six ladies from Wichita Falls were finally on their way back home so she helped Rose finish cleaning while the girls played. Then Rose and Elizabeth had a delightful afternoon teaching the girls how to make sugar cookies with delicious vanilla icing on top. Except the two girls had more icing on their faces and in their hair than on the cookies.

William came through the door, laughing at his sister and little Betsy. He washed up and helped them finish up the last of the cookies. The boy seemed happier today, not so nervous. Elizabeth passed by him, ruffling his hair.

Rose took the two girls out on the back porch to give them a bath

in the metal tub. The shrubs around the property hid the porch well enough no one walking by would see them.

Elizabeth began to cook the chicken for dinner. She smiled at the girls as they splashed in the water filling the house with giggles, Noah walked through the door. He held a paper in his hand.

She turned.

He held it out to her.

Wiping her hands on her apron, she approached him. “What is this?”

“Take a look.”

The land parcel he bought had over six hundred fifty acres. “How in the world were you able to afford this?” she questioned.

“I rode with an outlaw gang for over a year undercover. I never needed the money the Rangers paid me. There was a big, fat deposit waiting for me when I was done, along with the reward. This is the result. It’s our land, darling. I’m going to start building first thing tomorrow.”

“How far away is this, Noah?” Now that Katie made a new friend, she didn’t like to be too far out, especially if it was in the middle of nowhere.

“No worries. It’s closer than going to Wichita Falls. I’m going to take William tomorrow morning and I hired some men who will help me build our cabin. It will be small at first, but we can build on as time allows. I’m afraid I’ll be at the property site from daylight until dawn each night, Elizabeth. May spend the night there to get it done faster but we’ll see how it goes first.”

“I’m proud of you, Noah.” She folded the paper to hand back to him.

He took her hand, lifting it to his mouth and kissed her fingers, one at a time. “I aim to make you the happiest woman this side of Dallas.”

“Oh, Noah, you do make me happy.”

When Katie saw Noah standing in the doorway, she ran up to him, freshly washed, her damp hair hanging in her face. She put her little arms around his legs and held on. “I missed you,” she told him.

Noah picked her up. “It looks like you have a friend to play with.”

“That’s Betsy. She’s five. I’m four.”

Noah nodded to the the other child. “Hello, Betsy. Nice to meet you.”

Betsy strolled across the kitchen floor, her arm held out. She took Noah’s big hand in hers and gave it a shake. Elizabeth laughed as her little body shook along with her hand. “I’m Betsy. How do you do?”

“I do just fine,” Noah told her, a wide grin across his face. “Now, little ladies, if you will excuse me, I’m going to clean up myself.”

“Don’t be late for dinner,” Elizabeth called, happiness filling her from the bottom of her shoes to the tip of her apron strings. She settled the girls in the parlor so they could look at a book. Rose read to them while Elizabeth made the dumplings.

“Are you sure you don’t need my help?” Rose asked.

Elizabeth didn’t feel like cleaning up tons of flour tonight. She planned to spend as much time with Noah as she could since he would be leaving tomorrow to build the cabin. “I’m fine, Rose. Keeping the girls occupied is more help than you can imagine, please, continue.”

The renters began to come back from their long day of work. A few men sat in the parlor, pretending not to listen as Rose read out loud to the girls. Elizabeth swore they were just as enthralled as the children.

Sheriff Nightingale stopped by to pick up Betsy. She handed him a dish of chicken and dumplings, along with a dish of vanilla pudding, promising to allow a sleepover for the girls soon. It seemed to calm the two down knowing they would be able to spend more time together.

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For two weeks, Elizabeth and Noah kept busy. She sent for Betsy on the days the girl was in Mill Ridg while Noah and William worked on the cabin. Every now and again the two rode into Wichita Falls to see if there was any word about the children’s father.

One evening when she rang the bell for dinner, it didn’t take long for the table to fill up. Elizabeth loved watching everyone pass food around the table, enjoying a hearty meal like a family. As Rose said

grace, the others bowed their heads. Katie was squeezing her hand so tight together, Elizabeth wondered if she would hurt herself.

When Rose said amen, Katie spoke up. “And God, help my daddy find my mama in heaven. Don’t let the clouds get in the way, amen.”

“That was sweet of you, Katie.” William patted his sister’s shoulder.

Noah was quiet all during dinner. He seemed to avoid any type of communication with Elizabeth. She wasn’t sure why he wasn’t speaking, he had been fine this morning at breakfast.

“Shall we go for a stroll after dinner?”

William wrinkled his nose while Katie began to jump up and down, those curls bopping along. “Can we? William, you come too!”

How could a brother refuse a plea like that? Elizabeth pursed her mouth to look stern as William looked to her for permission to stay here. Even though he had been working hard with Noah, he sighed. “Alright, I’ll go with.”

Everyone helped to clean the kitchen. It was packed but Elizabeth wasn’t about to refuse anyone’s offer of assistance. Even the renters cleaned off their plates.

They all wanted to go on a stroll. That seemed to be how everyone felt these days, they were all one big family. “Well then folks, let’s take a stroll down past the church. It should soon be finished.”

Five renters, along with Noah, Elizabeth, Rose, William and Katie began their walk. It was a lovely night out, the sun was setting over the horizon. Elizabeth tucked her hand through Noah’s arm. They walked that way in silence. No one had much to say, Elizabeth guessed everyone’s bellies were so full they didn’t want to do much talking.

That was fine with her.

She wanted to know what was bothering Noah.

Because something felt wrong. As wrong as the day was long.

Chapter 7

“Always be courageous. Cowards aren't tolerated in any outfit worth its salt”

-the code of the west

*K*atie and William were settled in bed. Elizabeth settled in the chair outside while Noah and the sheriff spoke quietly in front of the sheriff’s office. “Wonder what that’s all about?”

Rose stirred from her chair. “Not sure, guess they’re just talking. Whew, I almost fell asleep. I think I’ll go on to bed.”

“Goodnight, Rose. Sleep well.”

Elizabeth watched for ten minutes while the two continued their intent conversation. She didn’t want to pry but something was wrong and Noah was speaking too quietly for her to make out any words. He had promised her he’d never leave her again. Although she believed him, there was an awful feeling deep down in the pit of her stomach.

The two shook hands at last. Elizabeth was going to get to the bottom of things. She didn’t want to have any secrets between them, not any more. The moment he came across the street and moved to the front porch, she asked, “Would you care for some hot tea? It has lemon?”

Noah sat down beside her. He placed his arm around the back of the bench and sighed. He took off his hat and shook it, then set it on his knee. “Thank you, nothing for me.”

She turned to him, placing a hand on his chest. His heart was beating a mile a minute. “What’s wrong, Noah? You’ve been quiet all night.”

“We found the children’s father.”

Her heart raced. “That’s wonderful. Isn’t it?”

“No, it’s terrible.”

“What? Why would you say such a thing? William has been wanting to find him for so long.”

Noah removed his arm and leaned forward, fiddling with the hat on his knee. More like crushing it between his hands. “Sheriff Nightingale warned me earlier there’s some bad news. I just now found out.”

“Are you going to tell me?”

“You’re not going to like this one bit.”

Elizabeth fretted. “Why don’t you tell me and let me decide?”

“So be it. The truth is the father abandoned his family.”

“Oh no, maybe I don’t want to hear this.”

“You should. Then you’ll know what we are up against.”

Elizabeth let out a puff of air. “Go on.”

“Lance Stewart married his wife for the little bit of money she had saved up. He was a gambler, lost everything except the cabin he lived in, which belonged to his parents, may they rest in peace. He was about to lose that as well when he met her. She had some money when she came to Wichita Falls. Long story short, he married her, moved her into the cabin by the creek and left her there for weeks, high and dry, spent every bit of her savings. This went on for years. He joined an outlaw gang, brought them around, even after he gave her two kids. They used the cabin as a hide out.”

“Where has he been for the last year?”

“Mexico. His gang was robbing folks along the Mexican border, hiding out just over the border in Texas. Their luck was running out, a few were killed. He was close to getting caught when he decided to bring what’s left of the gang back here to hide out. There’s three men left, including Stewart.”

Fear engulfed Elizabeth. Would he try to get his children back? Did he even know his wife was dead?

“We left a note on the cabin door asking any relative to inquire at the sheriff’s office in Wichita Falls for more information. When Stewart found out his family wasn’t there, instead of checking in with

the sheriff, he lost his temper, threatening one of the townsfolk before Sheriff Montana threw him and the gang out of town. It took the sheriff and several armed citizens to move them along."

"Oh my word! This is awful. We can't give those innocent children back to an outlaw! Where are they now?"

"Sheriff told Stewart what he's looking for is in Dallas to lure them away from here."

Relief flooded Elizabeth. "So, they are on there way there?"

"It appears they are heading that way. Sheriff Montana and his armed guards rode behind the four men for some time to make sure they didn't come back. Even though they are wanted outlaws, he couldn't arrest them. There was no bounty on them here in Wichita Falls, only in Mexico."

Elizabeth groaned. "It will take a Texas Ranger to arrest the gang?"

"It appears so." Noah fidgeted with his hat.

"Or, an ex-ranger who hasn't handed in his badge yet?"

Noah cringed. "It appears so."

"What happens when they get caught?"

"Men like those don't get caught too often. They'd rather shoot it out."

Elizabeth's worst fears were coming to light. She had to know the rest. "What if they are caught? Will they go to jail?"

"Most likely they will hang. They've killed people, innocent bystanders."

"So either way, in the eyes of a child, you will be responsible for the death of their father? I know you, Noah Holloway, you won't sit idly by."

He nodded, unable to speak.

Elizabeth's hand went to her heart. "Dear God, help us all."

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The plan was simple, even if Noah knew things could go wrong at any moment. The plan was to take the train from Wichita Falls to Dallas to beat the outlaws there and arrest them before they could

cause any more havoc or harm. Noah was the only one in the area who had the authority to arrest them. It wasn't going to go well, he realized it the moment they stepped off the platform in Dallas four hours later.

Noah knew nothing ever went according to plan. For the sake of those two children, he had to at least try. Their father was a cruel, heartless outlaw, not even caring that he left them alone for over a year to fend for themselves. William had to carry the burden of taking care of his little sister, a mere four year old. It wasn't right. Well, Noah planned to make it right.

He stood on the platform, the noisy city in his view. Sheriff Montana and Sheriff Nightingale stood along side him. The three were a force to be reckoned with. At least it looked that way from where they stood.

When the rail road man led their horses to them from the livery car, the three men saddled up. There was no time to waste.

An outlaw gang was loose somewhere in the city of Dallas and Noah planned to put a stop to them once and for all. "I'm not sure it was a good idea to send them here, Nightingale. Too many people. We don't want innocent bystanders getting hurt."

Sheriff Nightingale grunted. He tore off a piece of jerky he found in his saddlebag and handed the rest over. "Didn't have much choice, Ranger. It was better than the gang hanging out at that cabin, only to find the kids were close by. Sooner or later he would find out the children were right next door. My strategy bought us time to figure out a plan."

"Yeah, guess you're right."

They rode through town, Noah's eagle eye watching everyone who moved. If they were here, the three men would find them. He fiddled with his badge, once again sitting proudly on the lapel of his vest.

He missed Elizabeth the moment he had left this morning. She held back the tears, trying to be so brave but he knew she worried he'd never come back. He didn't want her to relive the past, this was different. The reason he was leaving this time was because of the children. She realized it, too. If those kids were ever to have a decent

life, their outlaw father had to be caught and punished. It wasn't as if he could ignore the man and hope he never showed his face around here. A man like Stewart would search for what was his and hurt anyone who got in his way, even if he didn't want what was his. Noah knew his kind, he had rode alongside men like him for over a year. Danger was their game.

Noah hadn't wanted to leave Mill Ridge, but this outlaw gang needed to be stopped

Noah understood his reasons for living was the beautiful woman he loved. She had stood tall as he made haste to leave, looking so strong and brave.

Elizabeth gave him courage. She had wiped the tears from her face and lifted her chin. Holding Katie in her arms and with William standing alongside of her, she looked at him with a sullen smile. I love you, she whispered, for his ears only.

Noah had to get his mind back on the business at hand. Finding these outlaws in Dallas was like finding a needle in a haystack. Yet, he knew he wouldn't leave without bringing the gang to justice. He was glad to have these two men of power beside him. They had both proven they were staunch fighters. He knew they had his back and could be trusted. "Guess we better start at the first saloon on Main Street and work our way from there. Seems people like to talk best when they've been drinking."

Four hours later the three men were no further along than before.

"We've been in every drinking establishment in Dallas and no one has seen the gang. They are like ghosts. Vanished into thin air."

Sheriff Montana urged the men on. "Let's get something to eat. It's been a full day."

Noah grabbed a newspaper from the stand in front of the small café they dined in. After ordering, he turned to the police and court reports in the Dallas Herald.

"What you looking for?" Nightingale inquired.

"Force of habit, checking the police report." Noah searched the articles but nothing caught his attention. Except maybe the couple who got fined for living together outside of matrimony. "Says here

this couple living outside of marriage got fined one hundred dollars."

Sheriff Montana whistled. "That's mighty high for not even committing a real crime."

"Seems it's a crime here in Dallas." All Noah could think about was matrimony to his beloved Elizabeth. When this was over he wasn't going to fool around. He had been waiting to build their cabin on his new ranch before getting hitched. He had ideas of making it perfect. Now, all he wanted was to get those walls up so they could build it together. Along with the two orphans, a man couldn't ask for more.

"What's that right there?" Nightingale pointed to a list of names.

Noah looked closer. "Looks like these men are exiled from Dallas. Listen to this: The following men will be shot dead on the street if they ever step foot on Dallas soil."

A frown appeared on Noah's forehead when he noticed the names on the list. Stewart's name popped up like a bad habit. He stood. "Let's go, men. We need to find out when this took place."

Instead of waiting for their meal, the three men hurried to the police station where they met with a local officer.

The officer didn't look too pleased to have others asking questions. "What can I do for you?"

"We have a few questions, officer. Would you mind directing us to someone who can answer them?" Nightingale did most of the talking until Noah had no choice but to step in.

"I'd say it's none of your business. You don't look like you folks are from around here." The officer sat at his desk, his hands folded.

Noah sensed he was nervous. "These two men are law officers as well. This is Sheriff Montana from Wichita Falls and Sheriff Nightingale from Mill Ridge."

The officer stood. "Well, you ain't got no jurisdiction in my city."

Noah didn't understand why some law officers had to be so darned prideful. He flipped his badge on to the man's desk. "Maybe they don't, but, I do. Texas Ranger here. Names Noah Holloway and I have a few questions for you."

Noah thought the man would fly over the desk and nail him with a fist. He was so angry at first. Then, the officer sighed, knowing the

Ranger had the authority to over ride whatever he decided. “What do you want to know?”

“The men whose names are on the list in the Herald. When did this take place?”

He thought for a minute. “I don’t rightly know. Let me check some paperwork.” The officer shuffled through his desk drawer for a few minutes.

Ten minutes later Noah exchanged looks with the other men. The officer was taking his good old time on purpose. He sat down and read a report, shoving a pair of glasses on his face first. Then he took a sip from the tin cup in front of him. “Get on with it,” Noah urged. “We have business to attend to.” Like eating dinner, Noah thought. He was starving and so hungry for Elizabeth’s good food. When he returned to Mill Ridge he was going to tell her how much he loved her cooking. There wouldn’t be a day gone by he wouldn’t appreciate how she cooked and baked so well.

The officer stood. “Says here in this report five men started a raucous at the Eisenlohr Market Drug Store, trying to steal some goods. The owner aimed a shot gun and run them out the door. Later on that night they were obstructing justice by knocking over some signs and hurling stones at a young man. The last straw was in the saloon where they cold-cocked the bartender. My men and I surrounded the saloon, ready for a fight but they grabbed a hostage and made there way to the edge of the city.”

“Where did they go?”

“Not sure. I didn’t have enough officers on duty to go after them. We told them when they let the hostage go if they ever came back to Dallas again, there would be a warrant for their arrest. When they laughed and said they’d never be back, I told them they’d be shot on sight. I know each man’s face. If they ever return, they’ll never leave here.”

“Your sure they never returned?”

“My eyesight ain’t that bad. I’d know it if they were here. This is my city.”

A burning fear began to rise in Noah’s gut. He didn’t waste time.

“We need to get back to Mill Ridge. If they didn’t come back here, nine chances out of ten they circled back after all.”

When Montana and Nightingale realized they left their towns wide open to the outlaws, they both swore in unison.

“Now we don’t like to hear that in public,” the officer told them.

“My apologies but I don’t much care. Our towns may be in danger because you didn’t haul these outlaws in the first time,” Montana threw back. “Let’s saddle up.”

It had taken them four hours by train to get to Dallas this morning. The next train wouldn’t be through until eight the next morning. If they rode all night, which was dangerous and yet it was what had to be done, they would make it to Mill Ridge by dawn.

“I know a farm along the way,” Montana told them. “We can stop and give the horses a rest and fill our gut with food. Marshall Montgomery may offer up a few men to help us with the outlaws. Now that we know they have no where else to go, it’s time to finish this.”

“Agreed,” Noah told him. “Let’s finish this.”

They rode out of Dallas with a new purpose. Even though the sky was beginning to darken, the three men knew it was a dire situation if they didn’t make it back to Mill Ridge right away.

Noah pulled the Ranger badge out of his pocket, securing it back on his vest. He had grabbed it in a hurry when they left the police station. He wanted to wear it proudly one last time. After this, he was going to retire as promised. This time he had made an exception. Because of William and Katie. They deserved a life rich with happiness and security.

No outlaw would come between them, not if he had anything to do with it.

Chapter 8

“Give your enemy a fighting chance”
-the code of the west

*“W*ell, will ya look here.”

The front door of the boarding house was flung wide open. Four unkempt, smelly men made their way inside, standing in the middle of Elizabeth’s parlor like a group of outcasts.

Dinner had ended a half hour before. Most of the renters were in their rooms or out of the building. Rose and Elizabeth had been tidying the kitchen when the door was flung open like a tornado swept through. She wiped dirty hands on her apron. “May I help you?”

Katie and William were sitting side by side in the parlor reading.

“Daddy? Is that you? Daddy?” Katie whispered, fearful yet excited to see a familiar face.

“It’s me, button-nose. Come to your daddy.” He held out his arms.

Katie stood, pressing down the hem of her dress with two trembling hands, seemingly afraid to make a move.

Elizabeth noticed she was afraid. No child should be fearful of her father. She stepped forward. “I believe you may have scared her barging in the way you did. Perhaps your friends wouldn’t mind waiting out on the porch. I’ll bring some lemonade to quench your thirst.”

Stewart nodded to his gang. “Go on, do as she says. We don’t need no lemonade, that’s a girly drink.”

Elizabeth waited until the others left to reprimand him. Her hand went to her hip. “I assume you are Lance Stewart, the children’s

father?"

"That'd be me," he told her, a grin a mile long covering his face. The man was so rude he didn't seem to have any intentions of removing his hat. Yet, it was the least of her worries when he came straight out with his question. "What are you doing with my kids?"

William, his face contorted in anger, spoke up. "Mama is in heaven."

Stewart stared at the boy for so long, Elizabeth wasn't sure what to do or say. "Why in hades didn't you take care of her?" When he marched over to the boy and slapped him across the face, she placed herself between the two. William's fist curled together, she knew he wanted to fight back. Elizabeth did her best to keep them apart. She shook her head at the boy.

"Please, you two. Stop! Right, now! There will be no fist-a-cuffs in my home!"

"Everything alright here?" Reverend Pope hurried down the stairs in stocking feet, stopping in haste when he noticed the outlaw.

"Fine, Reverend. Please, escort Rose to her room. I'll handle this."

"Are you sure?"

The outlaw raised his voice, not caring if he scared little Katie. "She said she was fine. Now, go on, do as the lady said."

Reverend Pope was a praying man, not a fighting man. He took Rose's hand, helping her upstairs, even if her room was on the first floor. Elizabeth knew Rose would be safe with him. The least amount of people involved would be better for everyone.

William chewed his bottom lip, his fists clenched together, feet apart. It was apparent the boy didn't much care for his father.

Katie's face reddened right as she began to cry. Elizabeth scooped her up, gathering the child in her arms and began to rock her back and forth. "Now, look what has happened. You are scaring this child! Perhaps we can discuss this in the morning, sir. I believe the children have had a shock seeing you after you've been gone a whole year."

"Nonsense! They are coming with me, they are mine and I take what's mine. Mayhap I can use them to hold off the law if the law comes to bother me again. Dang got run out of Wichita Falls."

Elizabeth tried to hide her fury. Using a child or children to keep the law at bay was a horrible thing to do. He didn't care about these two. Not one bit. She had to stay with the children until Noah returned. "I'm sorry to say, Mill Ridge is not much better. You can't stay here. Sheriff Nightingale will be back before long and will run you out of here, also."

"Is that a fact? Well, we'll see. For now, it's probably best we move on. I'm gonna go get some staples for me and my men and then we'll be over to collect those two. Going back to my cabin and stay awhile. You have what's mine ready in twenty minutes. Where's the mercantile?"

Elizabeth was getting worried. She pointed in the direction of the store and watched as he left, slamming the door as if he owned the place. Letting out a deep sigh, she felt Katie tremble.

"I don't want to go. Mama's in heaven, and he's mean to me."

"How about if I go with you?" Elizabeth had already made up her mind the children would not be safe with him. She wasn't about to let them go through this alone.

Rose and the reverend scuttled down the stairs. "Elizabeth, we can hide the children. I'll go out the back door and get a wagon. We can be gone from here in no time."

Elizabeth shook her head. "Not with that mean looking fellow standing on our porch. It looks like he was left behind to keep an eye on us. There's no way to sneak past to get to the livery."

Reverend Pope had to agree. "Yep, it'd be fool hardy to try. There's not much we can do. The children are his by right. The only thing we can do is wait for the two Sheriffs and Noah to get back and hope they arrest this gang of outlaws. Where are they, anyway? I thought they were after these guys?"

Elizabeth placed Katie on the settee. "Somehow this bunch of outcasts turned around, perhaps they slipped away. There's no way they went to Dallas and back in such a short amount of time."

Reverend Pope sounded worried. "You mean our sheriffs are in Dallas searching for men who are actually here? Jesus, help us all." He made the sign of the cross over each one of them, closing his eyes to

pray.

Elizabeth wasn't about to give up. Not by a long shot. "Katie, we're going to go pack some clothes to take back to the cabin. Let's pretend it's going to be a little trip to the woods. Then you can show me all the things you loved doing with your mama. How does that sound?"

"Okay, I'll help you," her little voice shivered and shook. She placed both hands in the air to be picked up.

As Elizabeth turned to pick up Katie, William stepped in front of her. "I don't want you to come along. He'll hurt you," he told her, in a low tone so Katie didn't hear.

"It's going to be fine. I promise. Noah will come for us."

"He hurt mama." The fear and loathing from the boy's heart resonated from deep inside.

Elizabeth gave him a hug. "Trust me, William. Please. Noah will save us." She squeezed her eyes closed, sending an extra prayer to heaven for all of them.

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By the time the outlaws came back, Elizabeth had two bags packed and a basketful of food. She was pretty sure if she stayed busy cooking for this group, she would be safe until Noah arrived. And he would, her confidence in him rose up as each minute passed.

"I have our buggy ready to go to the cabin," Elizabeth told Stewart. "I'm going to ride along, to help care for the children. Besides, you men must be starving by now. I have some leftovers from dinner and plenty of provisions for a week."

Stewart stood a little too close for her liking. He smelled as if he had imbibed at the local saloon. This wasn't good. What had she gotten herself into? "That's mighty fine of you, we are all much obliged."

The other men laughed as well as the three of them went to load up the buggy. There was no help from any of the outlaws who stood idly by while they carried everything outside. Elizabeth struggled to lift a carpetbag onto the buggy. William saw her and quickly picked it up.

“Bunch of lazy, no good rotten heathens,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Keep your temper under control, William. This isn’t the time.” She knew he was frustrated. “Don’t spoil this. I promise Noah isn’t far behind these scoundrels.”

William took up the reins as they followed behind two of the outlaws. A few townsfolk watched from their porches but most stayed inside, fearful without the sheriff close by. Everyone was wary of the strangers in town. News traveled fast and it didn’t appear that anyone wanted to become a hero to save Elizabeth and the children as they rode out of town under the guard of four outlaws. Without Sheriff Nightingale, there wasn’t too many brave souls afoot.

Elizabeth understood everyone was scared. This was a new town, one that was once filled with outlaws like these. It was no wonder the people who remembered what happened before were scared. She hoped when Noah and the others returned, at least a few were willing to pick up their weapons and help round up the bad men. Frankly, she had about enough of being afraid. These men were bullies without any manners.

All she knew was there was no way on God’s green earth she could let these children go with their father and this mismatched band of outlaws without someone to care for them. No matter what happened, she would protect them with her life. She layed a hand across the top of her boot, making sure the blade she had slipped in there earlier was still there. It was the only weapon she had to protect herself, Katie and William.

Closing her eyes, she held on to Katie, who snuggled up next to her so tight Elizabeth thought she would be sitting on her lap next. Placing an arm around the girl, Elizabeth began to hum, hoping it would calm little Katie down.

Two of the outlaws rode in front and two were behind the buggy. The realization of what would happen to them if Noah didn’t come to their rescue hit Elizabeth like a blast of ice cold air.

Except she had to clear her head and think positive. Noah would come. He would know the moment he rode into town the reason she

went along to protect the children. So maybe William was more of a young man than a child, but to her, he was a lost child who needed her. So was Katie. They had no mother and it was her duty to make sure they were taken care of. God placed people and places in the paths of those who were smart enough to pick up the pieces and move the mountains in front of them, it was what she truly believed.

Elizabeth would move this mountain for these kids, one way or another. She just hoped Noah was not far behind. It was much easier with help.

A cluttered path had been cleared along the dirt road as the small cabin came in to view. The structure was old and set back against a tree line, a small area cut out for a yard. In the middle of the yard an axe handle stood out, its blade buried in a tree stump. Random pieces of wood were scattered close by as if someone had abandoned their job before piling the wood where it was intended to go.

Elizabeth was tired from a full day of work but it didn't deter her from helping to unload the buggy. Once inside, she placed a hand on each hip. "This hasn't had a woman's touch in a long, long time."

William nodded. "Mama was sick for many months. We did the best we knew how."

She gave William a nudge on the arm, careful not to hug him in front of the outlaws in case they made fun of him. "I know you did. Let's get to work. Keeping busy will take our minds off of them. If you start the cook stove, I'll warm up some dinner for these outlaws, er, men, and fill their bellies."

The front door stood wide open where Elizabeth had the advantage to see the four men lounging outside, leaning up against the post on the cabin's exterior. She began to close the door when Stewart's foot appeared out of nowhere.

He leaned in, smiling like a jackal. "Door stays open. I don't trust any of you."

Elizabeth's hands went up in the air. She was getting aggravated. "Fine! I'm getting the food warmed up. It will be ready shortly. Would you like to eat at the table or outside?"

Stewart snickered. "Outside is fine." Moving his boot, Elizabeth

gritted her teeth. The darn outlaws didn't even appreciate a good meal. They'd rather eat outside like a bunch of heathens instead of sitting at a table like normal folk.

William helped her the best he knew how, warming up a loaf of bread that was wrapped in cloth and cooking the left-over chicken and dumplings. Dusting off four plates from a shelf near the cook stove, she piled the food high, slicing off four thick pieces of bread and taking them outside.

Handing each man a plate, she watched them gobble their food, waiting for a compliment or thank you. There was none. Four men grunted and slopped the food around, ignoring her as if she were another post holding up the cabin's structure. Turning, Elizabeth stormed inside, determined these men would not make her lose her own temper.

"They act as if they are entitled to my cooking," she mumbled, talking mostly to herself.

"I want to hurt them all so bad. Pa always brought home men like them, mean and nasty, cursing all the time. I've had to cover Katie's ears many nights."

Elizabeth turned to William, who had been through so much at such a young age. "I promise you, this will end. Noah should soon be back, if not tonight, by first light. I'm sure he's making his way through the dark night to get here."

"Pa won't go to jail. He's already told my Ma that he'd die before rotting in a jail cell waiting to hang."

Elizabeth pondered. "He may change his mind if cornered. I'm worried about the two of you. Is there another way out of this cabin? I don't want you getting caught in the crossfire?"

William moved a small rug away from underneath the wooden table. "Here." The trap door hidden under the rug was too small for an adult, but Katie and William would be able to crawl through.

"I want you to promise me that when things start to happen, when Noah comes back, you will take Katie and crawl through there. Where does it lead?"

"Behind the cabin to the woods. I sent Katie through there when

Noah found us before so she knows how to get out. Except she circled back and stood there crying like a girl."

Elizabeth grinned. "She is a girl. Don't be hard on her. Now you promise me you will do as I say."

William peered outside and then back at her. He gave her a quick hug and promised. "I swear I'll do my best. Thank you for being here."

"You are most certainly welcome. Look at your sister, she's fallen asleep sitting up in a chair. Please take her to the bedroom. We'll all bunk in there for the night. Why don't you stay there as well."

The bedroom wasn't much of a room at all, it's wall made of thrown together blankets pinned from one edge of a wall to the other. But at least it separated the three of them from the outlaws. Elizabeth quickly cleaned up the kitchen, doing the best she could without having to go back outside for the rest of the dishes.

It was dark out there and she wasn't going to put herself in any kind of predicament. After hanging the washing cloth over a chair to dry, she hurried back to the make-shift bedroom and slid in beside Katie. William sat on the floor, his back leaning against the wall, eyelids drooping one at a time.

She tried to be as quiet as possible so William didn't wake up. The boy needed to rest, he had to keep his strength up in order to get him and Katie to safety as soon as Noah returned.

Elizabeth stared at the ceiling for so long, she was surprised when the outlaws had quieted down. There was no longer loud talk and boisterous laughter coming from out front. A cricket or two rippled through the night's silence. Her body began to settle, her eyelids drooped shut. Even though she tried hard to stay awake, it was almost impossible. The long day hit her all at once.

A shadow on the other side of the sheet startled her out of her subconscious state. Elizabeth knew it was Stewart on the other side, what did he want? She slammed her eyes closed, pretending to be asleep as a hand pushed aside the sheet. Fear tried to take hold of Elizabeth. Instead of giving in, she pictured Noah in her mind's eye, riding in to save the day.

After a few hasty moments, the shadow moved away. Elizabeth let

out her breath, as quietly as possible. Footsteps faded across the floor of the cabin.

After that, Elizabeth didn't sleep much. Each time she began to fade off, she thought about one of the outlaws moving aside the sheet. No, she had to stay awake for the children's sake.

As dawn began to lift over the horizon, light filtered through the small windows of the cabin. Elizabeth slipped out of bed, determined to busy herself this morning making breakfast for everyone. She slipped outside to do her business, taking the path to the edge of the property where the outhouse was located. Three of the outlaws were on the porch, chairs propped back, eyes closed. A shotgun lay across one of their laps. Seems he was posted outside as the look-out man but his snoring made her shake her head at his carelessness.

Slipping inside the small shed used as a privy, she searched for the lock. There was no way she wanted someone bothering her in here. When she found the hook to secure the door, she had it almost through when it opened wide.

Elizabeth gasped. A hand flew over her mouth before she could cry out. "It's Noah. Shh, don't yell."

He slid in the small space, pushing her against him. Taking her in his arms, his mouth drifted to her ear. "Don't say a word. I'm here with the two sheriffs and men from town. Marshall Montgomery sent along a few of his ranch hands that have the place surrounded. I need you to come with me, right now. You can slip outside and wait in the safety of the woods."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I can't leave Katie and William, they're alone in the cabin."

"They know how to get out. I've spoken to William about this before I left. He sent Katie through the escape in the floor the first time we found them. He'll know how to get out."

"No, I'm not leaving them. Besides, if they don't see me come out of here, you won't be able to surprise them. I don't want the children hurt."

The sound of footsteps trampled down the path in a hurry. Noah pulled the door tight, his fingers latching onto the metal closure.

Elizabeth paled. “Oh, God, please don’t let him find us like this.”

“He can’t get in, don’t worry.” Noah tried to reassure her but he held himself stiff as a board, on edge and ready to spring. He was so aware things could go bad at any moment.

The outhouse shook when someone knocked on the door. “Need any help in there?” Stewart laughed out loud.

“You go on now, let me do my business in peace. I can’t hurry and get breakfast started if your standing out there. I’m making pancakes and I brought some bacon and eggs, too.”

“Alright, but you sure you don’t need no help? I’d be obliged if you said yes.”

Elizabeth was disgusted at the outlaws awful offer. When she got a chance to see Noah’s profile, she saw the anger there. She grabbed his arm to hold him back. Shaking her head, she placed her fingers over his mouth. It wasn’t the right time to go after the outlaw. She mustered up the courage to speak, even though her voice shook with every single word. “I’d appreciate it if you let me have some privacy please.”

Elizabeth and Noah listened for him to move away. The silence was deafening. It was hot in the small space and the smell began to shift in their direction.

A few moments later, Stewart’s footsteps faded up the path. Elizabeth heard him talking to one of the other men. Her heart raced as she let out her breath, not realizing she had been holding it for so long.

“Please come with me,” Noah begged.

“You take the outlaws out. I’m going to stay with the children, make sure they get out of that horrible cabin. Now, kiss me, Noah Holloway.”

Noah did.

Elizabeth slipped out through the door. “I love you, Noah.”

He let her hand go. “I love you, Elizabeth. Stay with the children. Get out of the house as soon as they do. Please.”

The problem with getting out of the cabin with the children was not going to happen, she realized as she made her way up the walk.

Halfway there a hand reached out and pulled her off balance. Stewart appeared out of nowhere.

"If I can't join you in there, then I guess you'll have to join me out here in the open, out in front of all my men."

Elizabeth twisted her neck, looking back for help. The outhouse stood in the distance, the door now closed, no one in sight. Noah had already gone to his men. She was alone with Steward in the middle of the yard. She was as much a target now as these four men.

God, please help me, she begged, then remembered she had a weapon in her boot.

Would she be able to reach it in time?

Chapter 9

"Don't make a threat without expecting dire consequences"
-code of the west

*"Y*ou think I'm an idiot!" Stewart jerked on Elizabeth's arm, pulling her towards the center of the yard. "I know you are out there, Ranger. Take your men and high-tail it on out of here."

A voice swept over the camp. "I'm afraid that's not going to happen, Stewart. You are surrounded. Let the lady go." If Noah had to confront the man face to face he would, but he wanted Elizabeth out of danger. She was a living target. Any one of these might hit her with a stray bullet.

"Surrounded! Well, let me tell you a thing or two. I knew you was out there before the sun come up. Just a matter of time before you started with these threats. Now let me tell you what I got inside them their walls."

Noah swept the area. The three outlaws who were dozing away on the porch were now standing stiff, guns at the ready. They slowly began to move towards Stewart, spreading themselves out enough if someone on this end started shooting, bullets would be flying everywhere.

"Grant, go on and get me those kids," Stewart ordered.

The outlaw with the rifle backed up to the porch, not letting his sites off the tree-line, where he knew they were hiding. When he was far enough behind Stewart and the two other men, he nodded to Noah and his men.

Noah saw two pair of feet running towards the wooded area. One of Marshall Montgomery's men pulled William and Katie to safety while

Elizabeth looked back to see if they made it out.

She turned back to Stewart, who had her in his grip. Now that the children were safe, how was he going to get her to safety?

Stewart spoke up. “Grant, where’s the kids. Bring ‘em here!”

Grant shrugged. “I’m afraid they’re gone, sneaked away like bandits in the night.”

One of the other outlaws named Zeke turned to Grant. “How do you know, you didn’t even go inside to check.”

“That a fact?” Stewart asked, his eyes on Elizabeth. “Why don’t you go on in and check, Grant?”

She stood there so brave, her bottom lip quivering. Noah noticed the way she tried to bite her bottom lip to keep it at bay. When this was over he was going to marry that girl come hell or high water.

For right now, he had to keep the outlaws calm. “Let the lady go and I promise you won’t hang for crimes committed.”

Stewart laughed out loud. “Forget it, Ranger. I ain’t going to jail. You’re going to have to shoot me first.”

Grant spoke up. “That can be arranged. Duck, ma’am, right now.”

Noah didn’t give the order to start shooting. He wanted to stop the chaos considering Elizabeth could be hurt. Perhaps Grant realized he would be too cautious, which made things much more dangerous.

He left the safety of the big tree trunk as Grant turned the rifle on the two outlaws before they were able to get off a clear shot. It was probably a good thing Grant had done so. Noah wasn’t sure he’d ever start firing with Elizabeth in the way.

The proudest moment for Noah was when Elizabeth slipped from Stewart’s grasp, reaching down and pulling out a knife from her boot. She struck without hesitation, sinking it deep in his thigh, causing the outlaw to scream out.

Stewart’s gun went off at random, striking Grant in the leg, knocking the man to the ground. Right after Grant went down, Stewart stumbled and fell, giving Elizabeth enough time to run. “Get out of there!” Noah told her, coming towards the two.

Except Stewart had a hold of the hem of her gown. He tugged hard, pulling her back. She almost fell, not realizing what was going on.

Noah ran towards her, his gun at the ready, waving his arm for the others in hiding to come forward and help. Elizabeth stood almost directly in front of Stewart, blocking Noah's view. He didn't dare try to get a shot in, not with her so close.

His eyes were on her face, watching the horror there as she tried to pull away to no avail.

A shot rang out.

Elizabeth plunged forward, stumbling, surprised she no longer was held captive. He let the air from his lungs when he saw Stewart's lifeless body on the ground, his grip no longer on Elizabeth.

When Noah looked up, William stood there, holding a gun at his side. "William." He went to the boy, taking the gun from his stiff fingers, draping an arm around his shoulders, pulling him in for a hug. He didn't care who was watching. "It's over, son."

"I wasn't going to let him hurt her. I love her as much as my own Ma." William shook, his whole body in shock at what he did.

Noah pulled back, staring into the boy's eyes. "Stop right there, son. You did the right thing. Your Pa was a bad man. He had to pay for that sooner or later. Everyone has to pay the consequences of their behavior."

Elizabeth ran to them, flinging her arms around them both. "Oh, thank you Lord, for keeping my men safe!"

After giving them both hugs, she stood back, staring at the young man. "Thank you for saving my life, William. Although, we will discuss your behavior at a later time. I told you to get Katie out of here and keep going. You were supposed to follow directions."

"I know. I wasn't going to let him hurt you."

"You wouldn't know that unless you circled back." She placed two hands on his cheeks. "Now, you listen to me. Go find your sister, we are going home."

"Yes, ma'am."

Noah patted the boy on the shoulder as he ran to Katie, who was busy eating some hard candy one of the Montgomery ranch hands gave her. She sat on a wagon at the edge of the property where they kept her away from the shoot out.

“I hope she didn’t see anything. To be on the safe side, we need to leave so she doesn’t come out here and see the dead bodies.”

The front yard was a mess with three dead outlaws strewn there. Noah sighed. He gathered Elizabeth in his arms. “I don’t want to let you go, ever. You scared me, standing there with Stewart, putting your life on the line. You are a brave woman.”

Elizabeth laid a hand on his cheek. “Hurry home, Noah.” She ran to the wagon, lifting Katie in her arms and turned to wave.

Noah lifted a hand. He would finish up here and hang up his badge.

For good.

The three people he loved the most were heading back to Mill Ridge in the rancher’s wagon. This life was not for him, not any more.

He had a new purpose. Well, three.

Elizabeth.

Katie.

William.

The badge he put back on to capture Stewart was on his chest for the last time.

Relieved, Noah turned back to the scene. Grant was on the ground, half-sitting up, tying a strip of cloth around his leg, groaning with each move. Sweat poured down his face. Noah knelt down to give him a hand. “Thanks for your help, Ranger.”

Grant gritted his teeth as he tightened the strip. “I’m done going undercover, this life is over for me. Time I settled down to build that horse ranch I been dreaming about.”

“There’s land here in Mill Ridge. Bought myself a large parcel a few days ago. I’m handing in my badge for good.” Noah meant every word he spoke.

“Help me on up and I’ll throw mine alongside yours.”

Noah helped the man up. Along with a few others, they tried to place him in the buggy.

He wasn’t having none of that. “I rode in on my horse, and I’ll ride out.”

Noah shook his head. The man had a chip on his shoulder. “Let’s get you to Mill Ridge. It’s Tuesday so the doc should be in town today.

Nurse Ellie will get you patched up and good as new."

"Is she single?"

"I'm afraid not, it's the doc's wife. You best be on good behavior, he'll make your pain worse if you start flirting' with his wife."

It took five men to put Grant back on his saddle. Noah rode with him most of the way in case the guy would slump down and pass out. It wasn't a fatal wound but it was going to be painful come morning.

The crowd cheered when they rode down the street in Mill Ridge, clapping and cheering the men on.

Elizabeth stood on the porch, Katie in her arms and William by her side. The reverend and Rose stood close by, waving at the men coming down the street.

Noah stared at his bride to be, not wanting to take his eyes off of her. That's when he heard a big sound like a sack of potatoes hit the ground.

It was Grant, he had slid from his horse, passed out in the street. Noah held up his hand to the rest of the men. The fun was over, it was time to get this man taken care of and fast.

He didn't need to worry. When Nurse Ellie came running out, she began to order some of the men on the porch, who were probably patients, to help get the man inside. They lugged his large frame onto the porch and through the front door. "I'll be over in a bit to check on him," Noah told the nurse.

She waved, then hurried in after her new patient. Noah sighed. "It's been one heck of a day."

"Care for some lemonade?"

Noah turned to her. "I would love some but the horse needs taken care of first. You hold that glass for me, Elizabeth. I'll be right back."

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Elizabeth watched the man she loved take the weary horse to the livery. "It's time for a short nap, little Katie," she whispered to the child she looked upon as a daughter. Now that her father was no

longer a threat, perhaps it was time to find out how to make it legal. “I sure wish we had a lawyer in town.”

Turning to William, who looked so sad, she gave him a sweet smile. “William, it’s okay to take a rest period yourself. You’ve been through quite the ordeal today. Would you like to take Katie in and sit with her. She may be frightened.”

“Yes, I’ll take her inside. Can I wait for Noah first? I’d like to make sure he is okay.” William was obsessed since he returned from the cabin. He had followed her around for hours before Noah and his men returned, making sure she was OK. Perhaps he was in shock from being the one to pull the trigger.

“We will all wait for him.” She let William stand by her side until Noah came back. As soon as Noah reached the porch, William took Katie from her arms and went inside.

Elizabeth handed Noah a glass of lemonade. “Sit with me, Noah,” she told him.

“Much obliged.” He leaned back, taking a long draw on the glass of lemonade. “You sure make the best lemonade in the west.”

Elizabeth smiled. Lemonade was lemonade, nothing special about the drink. Anyone could make a glass. But she appreciated the thought. “Thank you.”

“Is the reverend here?”

“He left about ten minutes ago. Rose and him walked to the church to check on things. The walls are about to go up and he wanted to watch.”

“Sure is taking a long time to build.”

“Because it’s being built by the townsfolk. Many have other jobs to attend to. Most of the ones working today are volunteers. Perhaps you would consider giving a hand now that you are no longer a Texas Ranger.”

She was testing him. She knew it but she wanted to hear him say he was putting away his badge for good.

“I’m set on building my own house right now. Doubt I’ll have time to volunteer.”

She was saddened that he hadn’t said a word yet. “Why do you

want to know if the reverend is close by?"

He shrugged, finishing off the glass of lemonade. Placing it on the table on the porch, he turned to her. "Elizabeth, I don't want to wait any longer. Let's get married, today."

"Oh, Noah. We can't up and marry. There has to be a plan. Who will take over for me when I leave here? I can't leave Miss Addie high and dry without a proprietor for the boarding house."

"Rose wants to take over."

"Rose wants to marry the reverend as soon as the church is built."

"Elizabeth, stop."

He stood and brought her up with him. They faced each other on the porch, his hands in hers. "I am falling in love with Mill Ridge. I consider Katie and William our children now. We are a family. We have to make it legal. Today. No more dilly-dallying. I want to marry you in the grass by the tree at the edge of town. It's beautiful there, the perfect spot to marry the woman I fell in love with a long time ago."

Elizabeth closed her eyes. "You are promising me the moon but you didn't say the one most important thing I wanted to hear."

"Walk with me, Elizabeth. Let me show you instead."

"Right now?"

He walked to the edge of the porch and held out his hand. "Yes, right now."

The two walked down the street. Noah stopped in front of the blacksmith, John Hopper, who was taking a hammer to a piece of iron on his anvil, bending and shaping the form. Hopper looked up. "What can I do for you folks?"

"Can you make this into something for the lady?" Noah asked.

Hopper studied the metal badge. "How about that," he said, more to himself. "I sure can."

The blacksmith worked on the metal for quite some time while Elizabeth looked on in fascination. The tin star was barely recognizable. When John Hopper finally looked up, he appeared shocked, as if he didn't realize they both stood there, watching him work. "You startled me. I forget I have an audience at times. How is

this, miss?”

The finished product was a work of art. The badge was no longer a threat but shaped into a beautiful, recognizable cross. The blacksmith took out a long piece of rawhide, sliding the one end in the tiny hole he poked out at the top.

“Let me do the honors,” Noah told her. He took the cross, lifting it around her neck and securing it from behind with the rawhide strap.

Elizabeth smiled. A tear slid down her cheek. “I know how much this badge meant to you. I’m honored you would melt it down. Thank you, Noah, I love you so.”

“Do you love me enough to marry me. Today?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck, not worried at all if anyone saw them. “I will. Today.”

He didn’t have to melt down the badge but it did give her the security to move on. For both of them to move on.

The past was just that. In the past. What had happened a long time ago was no longer relevant. Noah and Elizabeth had each other. They had Katie, William and a town filled with people who cared. Mill Ridge, a new town, a new beginning for so many.

“Let’s go find Reverend Pope.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“What if -”

Noah silenced her with a kiss.

It seemed like the only way to get what he wanted without a fight.

Elizabeth closed her eyes and smiled. If she had to argue with him the rest of her life, she wouldn’t mind. Especially if what she got was a loving kiss like the one he just laid on her.

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Thank you for reading An Outlaw’s Honor. What’s next for Mill Ridge? How about Rose’s story:

Reverend Pope has been so quiet for so long. His work at building a church in Mill Ridge has been noticed by the whole town. But, when services begin, he sure doesn't act like an ordinary preacher. Some say he doesn't even know his bible verses. Is Reverend Pope who he claims to be?

Rose has been enamored by the reverend ever since he arrived as a guest of the boarding house she runs with her friend Elizabeth. Now that her comrade is married and living on the ranch with Noah, Rose finds herself in charge of the boarding house. Yet, she longs to be married like her friend, it was why she started out as a mail order bride a long time ago, even if that didn't work out the first time.

Reverend Pope keeps her at odds, promising marriage and yet keeping her at arms length. Is Reverend Pope who he claims to be? Is Rose's secret of who she really is safe from the town or is she placing everyone in danger?

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Keep reading for A Reverend's Rose

A Reverend's Rose

Book #2

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To our precious CJ
Always take the broken road to find the most amazing places

Rose O'Brien was starting over in Mill Ridge. But falling in love with Reverend Pope will bring pain and heartache when he finds out she is lying to him. He needs a clean, wholesome wife who hadn't deceived him from the start.

Can Rose simply walk away from the only one who has her heart?

James Thomas Pope was a determined man. Using the town's absent Reverend as a cover was the worst thing to do.

Will he chance losing the only woman he's ever loved by telling the truth or simply walking away?

Chapter 1

“Be careless in your dress if you must, but keep a tidy soul” -Mark Twain

Rose pressed a bonnet over her head, working hard to remember everything Elizabeth had told her. She awkwardly tucked strands of fly-away red hair under the lacy trim.

“Miss Rose, how are you this fine morning?”

She didn’t like to be caught admiring herself in a mirror but it couldn’t be helped. Rose had to maintain a decorum of sophistication now that she had taken over the position of proprietor of the only boarding house in Mill Ridge. If anyone saw her in her previous state, hair all frizzy and without pins, no one would ever take her seriously.

Today was the first day she’d be on her own. She turned to him with a smile. “Good morning, Reverend Pope. I’m mighty fine today. Yourself?”

“It’s a great day to serve the Lord!” He smiled, producing a dimple on the left side of a smooth cheek. His hair, as always, was immaculate. The reverend dressed well, always in a fresh button down white shirt with an expensive cloth vest or light coat. She glanced down to see his black boots were as shiny as yesterday and the day before.

“Indeed, it is!”

Reverend Pope’s positive attitude always made Rose smile. She was normally a happy-go-lucky person, if a bit clumsy and careless, especially when it came to cooking, but she was working on improving herself. Especially now that she was put in to such a

position with responsibility.

Whenever the reverend appeared in a room, her heart began to skip a beat of two. She supposed it was because she fancied herself in love with the dark-haired reverend.

He had been here for awhile now, renting a room while waiting for his parish and church to be rebuilt. Before she had moved here, terrible outlaws had invaded Mill Ridge, scaring people away. When the good folks of Wichita Falls, a neighboring town an hours ride away stepped in, they caught the bad men and began to rebuild this wonderful small prairie town. She was so happy to be a part of it now, even if she did miss home now and again.

"Are you going out, Miss Rose?" he inquired, adjusting his vest and taking his hat off the hook on the wall.

"Yes, I am on my way to get some fresh eggs for today's breakfast."

"I'm also leaving. May I escort you across the street?"

"Yes, you may." Rose was certain her cheeks turned pink. He had often paid her lovely compliments, even though it was always in the presence of the other boarders. He had escorted her to a desert social some time back and vowed he would be her husband some day.

He was always cordial and never out of line. A perfect gentleman. Rose wasn't used to a man being so proper, although it didn't take much to get used to.

When he deposited her on the other side of the street, Rose inclined her head and smiled. "Thank you, Reverend Pope. Breakfast will be ready in two hours. Make sure to be there or you will miss a good meal."

Rose tried to act like a lady in charge except she giggled when he smiled.

"You find me funny?" he inquired, a grin upon his own face.

"I find you pleasant, sir. You happen to be up before the sun comes up, each and every morning. Even before I begin my chores for the day, your presence shines forth, getting my day off to a good start. Perhaps it is your staunch faith in our Lord."

"Perhaps," Reverend Pope told her, nodding slightly as if in agreement.

Before he turned away, she noticed the good man was staring at her, right into her eyes. It was a bit brash for a man of the cloth to be so bold. Was God watching him as those dark orbs quickly looked away?

Even so, the good reverend made her smile each and every day. He had sworn he would offer for her hand in marriage some day, even though she figured it was not a serious gesture. He had his church, this town, why would he want to marry her? If he knew of her troubles back home, he'd run as fast as his long, muscular, sturdy legs would take him away from here. She was lucky she had been able to hide from her family this long.

"Something wrong?" he asked, turning back when she hadn't answered.

She shook herself, bringing a hand to her cheek. "Nothing at all. Have a wonderful morning walk."

Rose hurried to the doctor's office to fetch the eggs for the day. The doctor's quarters had a back yard filled with chickens from patients who didn't have the money to pay for their services. The boarding house bought fresh eggs daily and Rose helped during the times the doctor wasn't in. She'd gather the eggs and take them to the mercantile to be sold. It was a pretty lucrative business for the doctor. Perhaps even more so than his practice with all the chickens laying eggs every single day.

The doctor's wife called out from the office. "Good morning, Rose. How are you today?"

"I'm good, Nurse Ellie. I'll see myself out after placing money on the counter in the usual place."

Ellie peeked around the corner. The doctor was deep in conversation with his patient, so they didn't hear what the two women said. "I see you and the reverend are quite close. How nice for you, Rose."

"It's nothing serious, I assure you, Nurse Ellie."

"Are you certain? I happened to be looking out the window when I saw how he gazed upon you. Quite the handsome man, is he not?"

Rose blushed, her cheeks becoming warmer by the moment. "I can't

deny your words, although he has promised to ask for my hand in marriage some day. I suppose he is being kind. Look at me, Nurse Ellie, I'm covered in food most days and my hair won't stay pinned."

Ellie excused herself from the doctor's office, then motioned Rose to follow her out the back door. She helped pick up eggs to place in the sturdy basket. "You must never doubt yourself, Rose. You are a beautiful woman. Why, there are patients of mine who would die for the natural red color of your hair."

She shrugged. "I was always told with my red hair and Irish temper, no man would want me because of it. It's why-"

"Why, what, Rose? What were you going to say?"

Rose was impulsive at times but always kept her past hidden no matter the cost. She had kept her secret so long, even after she left home against her parent's wishes to become a mail order bride. When that didn't work out, she never told a soul. Even when she was captured and almost sold at an auction she never, ever spoke of her family.

Now, here was Nurse Ellie with her kind eyes and caring demeanor making Rose feel as if she had a sister of sorts to confide in. "I, uh, oh dear!"

One of the chickens picked that moment to scatter the dirt as it flew by, flapping its wings and making cackling noises. Nurse Ellie pulled Rose out of the way. "Is there something you wish to speak about, Rose? I promise, whatever it is will be safe with me."

Rose contemplated for a moment, unsure if she should let Ellie in on her secret. So far no one else knew. She loved to smile and laugh and dance and it always hid her sadness well. Rose was a hard worker and loyal to this wonderful town and hated to be serious about anything.

She wanted to keep the past where it belonged.

Mill Ridge was a brand new start for her and she didn't want to ruin things by bringing her secrets here. At the same time, she wanted to get the notion out of her head that her father may someday come storming through town demanding she return home to marry the man he had arranged for her against her will.

Rose placed a hand over her brow. “I want to get this off my mind, but, I don’t know if I can tell anyone. What if-”

Nurse Ellie wrapped an arm around her. “Rose, it’s obvious you are reluctant to speak right now. I don’t want you to ever be afraid to come knocking on my door. We are friends, that means a lot as far as I am concerned. When you are ready to talk, know that I will be here for you.”

She gave the nurse a hug. “Thank you. I wish I could tell you, but I have to get back to the boarding house. I’m sure my renters are getting hungry.”

Rose hurried across the street, thankful for Nurse Ellie and yet so afraid if she spoke the words out loud, it would be the catalyst that inspired bad things to happen. If her father ever found out she was here, out of spite he would buy up the whole town and bring his misery to this wonderful place. No, she would leave long before he ever instilled his wrath on this town.

As Rose was breaking the eggs in to the pan one by one, an egg slid down the cook stove to lie in a yellow puddle on the floor. Rose bent to wipe it up, her hand shaking. Thinking about her father sent her mind to reeling and made her nerves about to shatter at the thought of the man stepping foot in this town.

She had to keep her secret to herself at all costs.

No matter what.

Even if the good reverend wanted to marry her, Rose realized in that moment she would never be able to. Her father was so powerful he would find a way to have the marriage annulled and cart her home to live a life of misery and suffering in an arranged marriage.

“Let me help you.” The soft voice came out of nowhere. Rose jumped up so fast she bumped into Reverend Pope so quickly he stepped back when the spatula she held slapped his cheek.

His head jerked back.

“I’m so terribly sorry!” Rose grabbed the tip of her apron and dabbed it against his cheek. Even though there was a piece of cloth between them, she felt the coarseness of his skin through the material.

“Rose,” he cautioned, his eyes widening in surprise.

She snatched her hand back. “Oh, forgive me, I am so sorry. I, I didn’t mean to touch you like -”

“Rose! Look at your eggs, they are burning!”

She turned in time for a puff of black smoke to stampede up her nose. Frantic, she covered her hand with the corner of her apron while grabbing the handle of the cast iron pan, pulling it from the heat.

Reverend Pope quickly reached out to help but Rose brushed past, dumping the disastrous eggs on a pile off the back porch. She wiped a hand over her brow, almost in tears now, staring at the muck in the back yard. If she didn’t have to cook for a houseful of renters, she may laugh at the whole dreaded situation.

Instead, someone else did. A small chuckle came from behind.

She turned, her hands clinging on to the frying pan. Staring at the dimple on his cheek, Rose realized how silly this whole thing must appear. A tear fell down her cheek and then she burst out in laughter.

When she looked at the reverend, he was shaking his head back and forth, hands deep in the pockets of neat, creased slacks. He tilted his head back, eyes on her, making her laugh over and over again. It took more than five minutes for them both to settle down.

“I needed a good laugh, thank you,” Rose told him.

“I suppose I did, too.”

Rose nodded, then brushed past as she went inside to clean the burnt fry pan and try her skills once more. She had plenty of eggs so the few that were ruined would not be missed. He followed her inside.

She was curious. “Why did you need a laugh, Reverend Pope? You are the most centered, content person I know in this town.”

He tilted his head and grinned. “We all need to laugh, and you may call me by my given name. I think we know each other well enough by now, don’t you?”

Rose grinned, taking the pan and placing it over the heat once more. Concentrating hard, this time she cracked the eggs first before speaking. “I suppose so, that is if I knew your given name, Reverend.”

“It’s James Thomas. Or, JT to my friends. I consider you a friend.”

She began to turn around, surprised at his words then realized if she did so there was a great possibility the eggs would burn a second

time. She had to be responsible and feed the renters when they arrived at the table. According to the time, it would be in the next twenty minutes. “Very well then, I will call you JT but only when no one else is present. Using a first name basis may start tongues wagging and I’m in enough trouble as so as it is. Look at me, eggs everywhere and breakfast is not ready.”

“Let me help.”

Rose smiled. “JT, you rent a room, I don’t expect you to help cook a meal, too!”

JT tore the extra apron from the hook by the door. “I’d be glad to help. Consider it my good deed of the day. After all, God said to help thy neighbor when they have to have breakfast in a hurry.”

Rose laughed out loud. “God did not say it that way!”

JT shrugged, mumbling something under his breath as he took the cover off the bowl of flour to make pancakes.

She watched, careful not to stray too far from the pan of eggs. They stood side by side, JT adding some lard to the pan. While it sizzled, he mixed buttermilk to the flour to form the soupy mixture for pancakes. Tipping the bowl, he made a perfect round pancake.

Rose was amazed. “You do well for a beginner.”

“I’m no beginner. I’ve helped to cook for my two brothers many times while our parents were away.”

“Interesting. Most men won’t get near a box stove.”

“Had no choice when the help quit. My father wasn’t a nice person to work for.”

“Yes, I understand. We always had a new cook after my father was so mean and screamed at the top of his lungs, scaring them away. Just as we got used to one, there they went, running out the door.” Rose snapped her jaw shut, realizing she gave away a part of her past she didn’t want anyone to know about.

She let out a breath of air when JT didn’t seem to notice. He got quiet after that, concentrating on providing the renters with a heaping pile of delicious-looking, steaming pancakes.

Placing the food on the table, Rose cleaned up and sat at the head, while the rest of the patrons took their seats. Most of the renters had

been with her for some time and knew her well, but today was the first day she was on her own. Glad for JT's help, she smiled at him when he took a seat at the far end of the long table.

Rose reached out to take hands for the reverend's words. She closed her eyes, waiting for JT to begin. He usually always began the day with a quick prayer. When it became too quiet, she lifted her head to peek at him, noticing he sat there, staring.

At her.

A quick look around showed everyone else had their heads down, eyes closed, waiting patiently for him to speak.

She swallowed. The look on his face was so raw, it gave her a start. As if he were frozen in time, his dark eyes delved in to her own, staring at her as if she were the best thing in modern civilization. He was looking at her as if he wanted to devour her like the guests wanted to devour their breakfast. All their heads were hung, eyes closed but the shuffling of feet brought Rose back to reality.

She blinked, lowering her head quickly. What in the world had gotten in to the reverend? No man of God should look at a woman like that! A slow flush began at her neck, the warmth creeping up towards her face.

When he began to speak, she tried to compose herself. The moment the prayer was over, Rose began to pass the plate of pancakes around the table, then the eggs, waiting until everyone had their plates filled before digging in to her own. She wasn't about to look up to find JT staring at her again. It caused her nerve endings to rattle something fierce.

He was a man of God, he would want to marry a pure woman who never lied or had stolen from another person. Rose gritted her teeth together when she realized she had done both.

She lied about her past so much it was causing much anxiety. Trying to hide herself away in a new town where no one knew her caused Rose to always be watching over her shoulder in case her father's men found her here. Rose had hoped she was far enough away no one would ever find her in a small, unknown pioneer town.

She had also stolen money from her own father's safe to make sure

she would never be in a situation she wasn't able to get out of. At least that was what he had told her one time when she caught him stowing cash away in his study. She had been walking past his door when she had peeked in to see him loading money in to a vault in the wall. When she gasped, he turned around to find her there, inviting her in to explain she was never to reveal there was money hidden in the wall. She had been fairly young at the time but always remembered his words. He had said it never hurt to be prepared in this day and age. He had said even she should always be prepared in case she got in to a situation she needed to escape.

Then he had taken the doll she had carried in her arms and ripped it to shreds, threatening to do the same to her if she ever said a word. Rose had nightmares for months after that.

So when she had tip-toed across the immaculate wooden floors and Persian rug to steal her own father's hidden money, she didn't feel bad, justifying it to the fact he had taken away her prized doll and discarded it as if it meant nothing.

Later, after she had slipped away, she had placed the money in a bank where it was safe. Then she had gone on to meet her intended as a mail order bride and that fell apart fast. Thank God she had the money well hidden or it would all be lost.

It was always there as a padding, in case she found herself in dire straits like before. Rose never wanted to touch her father's money, ever, not unless she had to. But he had taught her well. She could be as shrewd as he was.

Even though JT had looked at her with such longing, she knew deep in her heart there was no way she would be the pure-hearted woman he was looking for.

It was all a façade.

She was a thief.

A liar.

A woman on the run.

Rose didn't dare drag such a good man in to her world of deceit.

Chapter 2

"Oh! What a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive" - Sir Walter Scott

JT watched his beautiful Rose struggle with some inner demons. She peeked up at him once before he said the morning prayers and then seemed to fall deep in her own thoughts as others ignored the two and ate heartily.

He leaned back in his chair watching as she chewed a bite of pancake. Her beautiful red hair was askew once again, the fly-away strands making him want to reach across the table and brush them from her face.

It had felt so good to work with her side by side in the kitchen, almost as if they were a married couple. He smiled to himself when realizing she seemed shocked to find he could cook as well as anyone. She had been concentrating so hard on not revealing anything pertinent about herself, she hadn't realized he had slipped up as well.

There had been many times when his parents went away for weeks on end that he and his two siblings were left to fend for themselves because the cook quit the moment his parents left on business travels. Every single cook was in fear for their life because he had always made dire threats to harm them. They always waited until he left the property before fleeing in to the night. There were more times than JT could count when he woke up to the news of another cook quitting.

The three boys were left alone with a gardener and housekeeper. Miss Melanie, the housekeeper, swore she would cook and keep an eye on them but most times she was outside watching the gardener. JT

never understood what they were doing outside, especially when the two disappeared for hours on end until he got a bit older and realized the truth of the matter.

"A penny for your thoughts?"

Her voice was like a sweet melody, soft and subtle yet so appealing it made him smile to himself. When JT looked up most of the renters were gone. He stood up, helping to gather the plates and silverware. "Let me help," he offered, wanting to forget about those harsh years of being practically abandoned by parents who were determined to mingle with the filthy rich of high society Dallas.

A hand reached out to rest on his forearm. "JT, really, you don't have to help. I can do this myself."

When she smiled at him, JT swallowed hard. Rose had no idea that he had loved her since he had seen her for the first time riding on her parents adjacent ranch. How long ago? Ten years, maybe? However long it was, he sadly knew it was soon time to reveal who he was and why he was here.

Except he didn't have the heart to do so yet and ruin a friendship.

Rose had hated the thought of a pre-arranged marriage. Hated it so much she had run away in the middle of the night to become a mail-order bride to prove to her father he didn't run her life. The only reason JT had agreed to a pre-arranged marriage was because it was her he'd be marrying.

His Rose.

In his mind he had claimed her the moment he saw her so long ago.

The woman he had watched grow up as she flew through the fields on her horse, defying the normal way a lady behaved. Her wild hair had always loosened from its braid, tumbling down her back, making him want to stir his own horse to life and ride alongside, yet he always held himself from doing so. Maybe he made a mistake not ever going over to meet her in person.

One day as he had watched her race her horse across the range, she slowed then turned suddenly, staring straight at him in the distance, even though he was far enough away she didn't know who he was. She knew he was the son of the neighboring rancher but they had

officially never met.

Then horse and rider had disappeared into a grove of trees. He hadn't seen her alone much after that time. From there on in, she had a companion with her when she ventured so far from her home. At least she was smart and cautious. JT hadn't meant to get so close but he was in awe of her horsemanship, of her free thinking attitude. Rose didn't ride like other ladies of her stature. She had thrown one leg over the saddle and rode like a man, racing against the wind.

Since neither parents took their children to any of the adult events, nor introduced them to each other, Rose never met him or his brothers. When she was ordered to marry the eldest son of the neighboring ranch, it was such a shock that within a month and a half, his Rose had gone.

That was almost a year ago. Now, here he was, in the same household with her and she was smiling at him the way he had always dreamed she would.

How could he tell her he was the man she was ordered to marry by her father!

"JT, are you alright?"

He nodded, removing the rest of the dishes from the table and stacking them on the tray she kept on the side table. "I'm fine, Rose."

"You look troubled all of a sudden. Are you sure you are well?"

JT laid a hand over top the one she rested against his sleeve. She was warm and soft. He closed his eyes, not wanting her to see the deceit and longing in his own. How did he tell her he wasn't a man of God at all but a sorry soul desperate to protect her?

"I'm fine. Guess I'm worried about the church and how long it will take to finish. We still need so much even with the townsfolk help and our last supply hasn't arrived yet." JT wasn't about to tell her he had stalled the shipment of material needed to finish the church in order to gain more time with her. Once the church was done, he would be inclined to send for the real reverend, who had been distracted with a sick relative. Another deception. He wanted to hang his head in shame and yet he knew deep in his heart she would never give him a chance if she knew who he was.

Rose patted his arm, a sweet smile tugging at her mouth. “I’m sure it will all work out. Like you say all of the time, trust God.”

“Thanks, Rose. I best be going.”

JT walked along the street towards the church, thinking about the past. After he had found out she was abducted, along with other mail order brides, no one had to force him to search for her. He volunteered to search every town in Texas until she was recovered. He had been gone four months searching for her but had to return when his mother sent him a telegram that his father was killed in a shooting on the ranch. Rustlers had been trying to take off with a herd of cattle when Rose’s father and his own had gathered men and tried to intervene.

His father was killed by a stray bullet and Rose’s father was crippled, no longer able to run a ranch alone. Rose was their only child. Her father begged JT to find her, to bring her home to marry so the two ranch’s would be combined.

JT never cared about combining the ranches. All he wanted was Rose.

Rose’s mother had been worried about her only daughter. She asked JT in desperation to promise to find her and he had succeeded. But he never sent a telegram telling them where she was, not yet. Because she had run away the first time, JT was afraid Rose’s father would send more men and that would scare her off once again. He didn’t want to think about losing her a second time.

JT had to be careful how to approach this whole mess which seemed to be getting deeper and deeper and covered with more lies.

“Hey boss!” Rodney, one of the townsfolk he had hired to help rebuild was hammering some wood in place. The church had been destroyed a long time ago when outlaws had taken over Mill’s Ridge. Now that they were long gone, the town wanted a beautiful new church. Which they would have in a few weeks, as soon as the material arrived. JT didn’t know how long he was able to stall the inevitable.

JT stood looking at the outside walls, nodding at the fine job that was being done. “Everything looks great, Rodney.”

“Well, boss, I know I should call you preacher or reverend or something but it don’t feel right, you know. Not with you being my boss and paying me such a handsome wage.”

JT moved closer. “Let’s keep the wages to ourselves. No one needs to know how much you get paid for this.”

Rodney nodded, slinging an arm across his forehead. “Yeah, then we’ll have every Tom, Dick and Harry wanting a job. By the way, boss, how is a man of God able to afford paying me such a big wage like you are?”

JT wasn’t about to reveal that along with his brothers he now owned one of the largest cattle ranches in Texas. Money was never an issue, their ranch had always done well. “I’ve saved some money, and there are some investors in this town. We wanted to make sure to hire the best in town and guess that was you.”

Rodney grinned at the compliment, tipped his hat before turning back to the wall he was working on. “Mighty fine of you then, Reverend. Guess I can call you that now that I know you are just the keeper of all that money. I was starting to get my suspicions going, thinking you was some shyster or something, having me build this for all the wrong purposes.”

JT laughed. He slapped Rodney on the back. “You’ve got quite the imagination, man.” Even though he felt exactly like Rodney said, a disreputable, unethical man who was trying to get something out of someone.

Knowing Rose thought he was someone else was killing him inside for being so deceiving. Would she ever be able to forgive him? Perhaps he should tell her now before things got too out of hand.

“Hey, boss, er, I mean Reverend! Why you want me to go so slow? I can have this all finished this time next week!”

JT knew that. He was holding out finishing the church to spend more time with Rose. He wanted her to trust him and get to know the real him, even if he was being a bit deceitful. He looked up at the steeple being built. Would God even forgive him for lying so much?

“It’s because the shipment of supplies has stalled. We won’t get it for a few more weeks so I don’t want you to run out of work.”

Rodney nodded. “Well why didn’t you say so. That makes sense!” He turned back to his work, chipping away at the boards he was using to build the front porch.

“I’ll head on over to Wichita Falls this morning to see what the hold up is.”

“No problem, Reverend Boss. It would be good to know so I can delegate my work accordingly.”

JT walked through town, heading for stables, wondering if it was too bold to ask Rose to ride along. Perhaps she would enjoy going to visit Miss Addie in Wichita Falls. On a whim, JT paid the livery man to rent another horse, a cute appaloosa he figured she’d love. Walking the two horses back down the street, he tied them in front of the boarding house.

Rose was finishing up the breakfast dishes. She smiled at him when he took off his hat and entered the kitchen area. “Morning, Miss Rose.”

Another renter occupied the parlor, so JT used the Miss in front of her name for propriety’s sake.

“You are back rather early, Reverend Pope. What brings you home so soon?”

JT jerked his head to see her cheeks redden. He didn’t miss her calling this place home. He grinned. “I would like to extend an offer to you to accompany me to Wichita Falls. I have some business to take care of and thought you may like to visit with Miss Addie.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “That would be lovely. She hasn’t sent over the two mail order brides she had promised yet. I should check on them to find out when this will take place. Are you sure there is room for me?”

JT nodded. “Oh yes, there is plenty of room.”

Rose clapped her hands. She blushed again. It was hard to look away from her joyous face. Her wide smile caused his blood to heat. He had to leave the room in case she heard the wild beats of his heart.

“I’ll wait outside,” JT told her, needing to remove himself from such close quarters. Rose’s enthusiasm was catching. He found himself looking forward to this small journey. Even though it would never be

appropriate to ride out of town with a gentleman alone in polite society, in the west it was slightly different.

Who wouldn't trust a man of the cloth?

JT stood on the wooden porch for over twenty minutes while Rose readied for the hour long journey. Wait until she realized she'd be riding and not going in a buggy. A small grin pulled at the corner of his mouth.

"How long do we expect to be gone?" she asked, almost sneaking up behind him on the porch. He had been so deep in thought he never heard her open the door.

"I'd say three to four hours at the most, along with having lunch at Jenna's café."

"I'll need to get back no later than three in the afternoon so I can start making the evening meal. I've got hungry renters you know."

"No need to worry, Rose. I'll have you back by then." He held his arm out but she ignored him and began to look back and forth.

"Where is the buggy?"

"It's not available."

Rose frowned. "It's always available, it belongs to Miss Addie and this boarding house."

"If you would rather take the buggy, then, I'll have to send these two back to the livery." He got her attention when he pointed to the Appaloosa and Thoroughbred patiently waiting on the street.

Rose clapped a hand over her mouth. Her eyes wide, she took the three steps off the porch in one rapid movement. To JT, she practically flew down the steps.

Her steps took her directly to the unique spotted horse, Molly. When JT went to the stables earlier, he knew she would like her the moment he saw her. Molly was a perfect fit, even though she could just as easily ride his thoroughbred, a taller horse more suited to his height.

JT watched Rose as she sidled up to Molly, speaking to her in a mere whisper, her hand sliding along the spotted girl's neck. When Rose took the reins gently in her hands, he thought she would jump on the horse like he had watched her do many times before.

Instead, she turned to him. “May I have a hand up, please?”

JT almost grinned. She didn’t need a hand up. Why, she was as sneaky as him. “Certainly.” Instead, he picked her up, tossing her up and onto the saddle. She sat there like a true lady would, both legs along the one side. Pushing her skirts aside, Rose smiled serenely as she waited for him to mount up.

The two rode out of town, waving to a few neighbors as they left the outskirts of Mill Ridge behind. JT knew it wouldn’t be long before she ached to ride Molly like she wanted. He saw it in her eyes, the lust for freedom. He knew the desire for the wind in her face and hair was about to overtake any décor of proper behavior.

He was right. To the right of the trail was a field that went on for miles. She kept looking at it while chewing on her bottom lip.

It had been quiet up until now. “How often do people ride this trail?”

She was going to ride hell bent for leather in a few seconds. Her foot was twitching, itching to be in the stirrups. JT grinned.

“Hardly ever. If there is someone on this trail, they are probably coming to visit at Mill Ridge. You know we don’t get too many visitors.”

“That’s good to know because I’m going to apologize to you right now. This can’t be helped.”

JT stared at the brightness in her eyes. She had a fever, horse fever. It was there, the deepest desire to break free and ride like the wind. He only hoped someday he would be the cause that made her shine like this.

Rose directed the reins as Molly shifted to her right, taking off like she was breaking free herself. Rose whooped out loud, her voice carrying back to JT, who dug in his heels and followed her across the meadow.

Rose flung a leg over the saddle as he knew she would, leaning low over Molly. Her hair, once pinned, now flew behind her like an ocean wave pounding the shores.

JT gave her some time then rode up alongside horse and rider. She yelled out once again, smiling at him, lifting her face to the sky, a look

of pure delight on her face. His heart raced. His lungs exploded when he no longer could catch his breath. She was sheer beauty up so close.

"I'm not sorry!" She yelled to him.

"No need to be. Enjoy!" JT let the thoroughbred take the lead, loving the competition between the two animals. After several minutes, the meadow came to an end. Rose and JT slowed, letting the two trot until the edge of the meadow was in sight. A small grove of trees were up ahead.

"Is that an apple tree?" Rose didn't wait for an answer. She slid from Molly and ran to the edge, trying to reach up for a green apple.

JT followed, picking her up from behind when she wasn't able to reach them. Rose giggled as he held her up by her waist. She picked four apples, dropping two to the ground before sliding out of his grasp. She fell to the ground with a thump and laughed out loud.

JT wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her.

Badly.

He reached down to pick her up by the waist and stand her upright. Rose still held an apple in each hand.

The look on her face said kiss me.

So he did what any man would do. He leaned forward, pulling her closer. Rose closed her eyes.

He dipped down and kissed her.

She screamed in his mouth.

JT's eyes flew open. He backed away. "What the -"

Rose had her hands straight out, holding an apple in each hand. When JT moved in for a kiss, the horses decided it was their turn to get an apple. Instead of the ones on the ground, they thought Rose was holding one out for them. A horse stood on either side of her, munching on the apple they stole from her hands.

He shook his head. It had been the perfect opportunity to kiss her. Rose laughed. She moved towards him again, taking his hand and pulling him towards a small creek nearby. "Let's sit here."

JT took off his light jacket, spreading it on the ground so she could sit without getting grass stains on her gown. He sat alongside of her, watching her staring at the water trickling along the haphazard stones

in the creek.

The desire to have her in his arms became so strong, JT had to get up and move away.

Rose looked up, puzzled. “Is everything alright. I’m sorry if I startled you.”

“I think we better get moving, Rose. You’ll never get back in time if we dally here too long.”

“Perhaps you are right.” She held out her hand. JT took it, gently pulling her up. When she didn’t move away, he reached out and pulled her to him, his head lowering to find her mouth.

He noticed before he helped her up the horses were busy chewing on grass. They would not get a chance to interfere this time.

The need to kiss her was so strong, it couldn’t be helped. When she didn’t pull away, he touched her mouth with his own, and all else was forgotten.

JT forgot he was a man pretending to be someone else. All he knew was Rose was in his arms, allowing him to kiss her like no other had done before. At least he didn’t think there had ever been anyone else. She had led a pretty secluded life on the ranch.

She didn’t hold back. Rose leaned in to him, her wild, carefree behavior showing in her kiss. Her arms wrapped around his neck, pulling him closer as if she wasn’t able to get enough.

JT knew this would lead to trouble.

He slowly lifted his mouth from hers.

She smiled at him as if he were the only thing that mattered.

He ached to kiss her again.

Instead, he pulled her arms from around his neck, gathering her hands in his own and kissed each knuckle before letting go. “We must go.”

Rose waved a hand in front of her face. “It’s a shame,” she muttered, more to herself than him.

“What’s a shame?”

“That we must leave. I wish I wasn’t a lady sometimes.”

It was probably the biggest compliment he ever had. She would prefer to ruin herself than worry about being alone with him in the

middle of a meadow. He didn't dare let things go that far. It wasn't fair to her.

Because when she finds out the truth, he may be the last person she ever wants to kiss.

Chapter 3

"Our doubts are traitors, and make us lose the good we oft might win, by fearing to attempt." -William Shakespeare

Rose was all shook up. A delightful kiss had been bestowed upon her by a wonderful man in a field by a stream. It was so romantic, she didn't think she'd be able to concentrate on anything else.

Ever.

Yet, she had to get her mind off of this special moment. Rose didn't dare show any more feelings for a man she didn't dare have. When she had first met him when he showed up at the boarding house, she had told Elizabeth they would marry someday. He had even told her so at one time during a desert social. It seemed too good to be true and she had loved his attention.

Yet, reality surfaced once again. Rose knew too well she would make a terrible preacher's wife. There was no way the town or JT would accept her after hiding her past from them. She had to stop this madness.

When he helped her get up on the saddle, his hand lingered on her back, giving honest to goodness goosebumps that trickled all across her skin. He was making it quite clear that he felt something for her.

With sheer determination she rode by his side as they made their way across the meadow, trying to forget she wanted JT to be the man she would spend her life with.

She needed a distraction from that wonderful kiss. Thinking about the man's prior life, she wondered where he was from. JT was a man of God, clean shaven, always dressed well by any standard. She

wondered what made him travel west to this small town.

He was such a gentleman, yet at the same time he stole a kiss so brazenly it had made her head spin. Yet there was something mysterious about the man. He never spoke about himself. Perhaps it was time to learn something more.

"Reverend Pope?"

JT turned. "No need to be so proper. I mentioned before you can call me JT."

"Perhaps we should keep it more appropriate. I didn't mean for that to happen."

JT sighed. She saw his jaw tense. "It happened. We don't have to apologize for the way we feel about each other."

"It's all so awkward, JT. I don't know where this is leading us, but we have to take a step back. I can't afford to get too close. My life is mapped out for me."

"How so?"

She sighed. "Miss Addie has already arranged for me to become a mail order bride. It was done the moment I took the position Elizabeth's departure created. Once she finds a suitable husband for me, I'll leave the boarding house to become someone's wife. We can't continue to distract from the real purpose that I am here."

JT pulled back on the reins, slowing his horse almost to a complete stop. "Rose, please don't tell me this. What we feel for each other won't simply die because Miss Addie promised to send you off as a bride. I'm sure if she knew how we feel, she would agree."

"I won't hurt the town of Mill Ridge with disloyalty. No, I'm afraid Miss Addie would agree as well."

"What do you mean disloyalty? You've been a true saint taking over the boarding house and caring for others. What are you keeping from me, Rose?"

She made a clicking noise with her tongue, urging Molly to go faster. "I have nothing to hide." Even though she knew her words were a lie, how could she ever tell the reverend about her past. He would never want someone like her who deceived everyone in town. No one knew of her past or her father and she intended to keep it that

way. Marriage to the reverend was impossible.

"Rose! Wait up!"

Rose flung her head back, giving her face to the bright sun as she raced full speed ahead to the road leading them to Wichita Falls. By the time JT caught up, she had slowed down, her windswept hair loose, trailing down her back. Rose caught up the tendrils, twisting her hair and tucked it all underneath the hat she wore.

They both rode side by side then, no words needed the rest of the way to Wichita Falls. Each time JT glanced her way, she caught him out the corner of her eye but kept silent, not wanting to bring back the earlier conversation. He must feel the same way, she surmised.

There was no changing the fact Rose was in love with a man she dare not have.

There was nothing, not one thing she could do about that fact.

No matter the cost. It would be too great if her father found her here. He would destroy the town of Mill Ridge with his money and power until she came home and married the man that he had arranged for her. A desire to hate the man he chose for her grew inside of her and yet she knew it wasn't that man's fault at all. She knew too well how driven her father was.

She did care about Mill Ridge. There was no way she would let her father near here. If she started a serious relationship with JT, it would destroy a town and its inhabitants because her father would eventually find her, she had no doubt on that end. Rose would be held responsible because she knew how cruel her father can be.

It was time to make JT realize he needed to move on and find himself a decent bride, one who would make him proud. He deserved as much no matter how hard it would be to watch.

That was it! She'd find him a mail order bride. The idea had Rose speeding up on the trail. The sooner the better! She even came up with an idea to get the church finished sooner so he'd be out of the boarding house and into his home at the sanctuary.

"What's the hurry, Rose?"

Rose realized she had gone quite a bit ahead of him. She stretched her neck to answer. "I have something important to speak to Miss

Addie about."

"That's interesting, so do I."

"If you don't mind, I'll go about my business and meet you there before noon. How does that sound?"

"Of course, that's fine. It won't be long, about five more minutes until we reach Wichita Falls."

Rose enjoyed the ride with JT but it was time to put her plan of action in place. Even though it filled her with dread, she had to make things happen and fast. The sooner the better.

It was why she went straight to the mercantile first. Rose slid from Molly and attached the reins to the post outside. She brushed her skirts and straightened her hat, entering the door to the shop as a bell announced her from above.

"Morning, ma'am," the proprietor said, nodding. He was leaning over his glass counter, holding a large round magnifying glass in his hand. "Names Jim Wheeler. What can I do for you?"

"Hello. I noticed your sign on the window said you have telegram service? I would like to send a telegram with the Western Union Telegraph Company."

He looked up and nodded. "You'll be the first. I was just reading the fine instructions on how to do so. We'll be getting a trained employee in a few weeks when our new post office opens next door, but in the meantime, I'm left standing here trying to figure this out on my own. The man who usually does this for me has done passed away yesterday."

Rose noticed his eyes looked strained, as if he was having a hard time reading. She offered to help. "Why don't I read the instructions, while you work the machine?"

"Mighty nice of you, Miss." He handed the small booklet over the counter. Rose took a seat on the stool at the counter and began to read. Within twenty minutes, they had her telegram ready to send.

"I'll just read over it one more time to make sure I didn't miss anything."

Satisfied, she had Mr. Wheeler send the telegram to the bank in Dallas, where she had placed the money she stole from her father's

safe. Even though she hadn't wanted to ever touch her father's money, the need to get the church finished had changed her mind. The sooner she did so, the safer the town of Mill Ridge would be from her father's wrath. JT would realize he needed a wife and she'd have one waiting in the wings to present to him. It was a foolproof plan.

"That will be one dollar and fifty cents."

"There you are." She handed him some coins, happy to have accomplished so much. Modern technology was amazing. "Now, if I may ask, Reverend Pope is waiting on a shipment of supplies to finish the church, is this correct?"

Jim Wheeler looked up from counting the coins. "I do believe so but he said he wasn't in a hurry. The company he bought them from is waiting on their final payment. I just received the bill today to present to the good man. Reverend said he'll make payment in about two weeks but they already shipped the goods here, expecting the payment upon delivery. Problem is, they are stored at the train depot, taking up too much space."

Rose wondered if the reverend didn't have the money to make the final payment. Was that the reason why the church wasn't finished yet? It didn't matter because she did have the means to move things along. "In that case, Mr. Wheeler, I do believe between the two of us, we can do some good for the town of Mill Ridge?"

He raised a dark brown and gray eyebrow. "How so?"

"As the telegram states, I've instructed my bank to pay for any invoices sent to them from here or Mill Ridge. If you would, sir, please send the invoice for the church's materials to my bank right away."

"Old man Harold will be glad to hear that! He's been storing the stuff for over three weeks."

"Three weeks? Does the reverend know it's been there for so long?"

"Of course he does. Speaking of the good man, here he comes."

Rose quickly turned to find him walking down the street. A few of the ladies he by-passed turned to stare. It wouldn't be hard to find him a good wife, Rose thought, then grimaced when she realized the streak of jealousy that engulfed her at the thought.

She turned to leave. "Please, don't tell him the material has been

paid for. Not yet. I also want to hire some men to deliver it as soon as the bill is paid and help to rebuild the church. I'll keep two rooms open at the boarding house to house them for free while they finish. Bill that to my bank, sir and please keep this under your hat."

"I don't wear a hat, but I'll keep mum about this whole affair. Thanks again for your help in deciphering that machine," Jim Wheeler told her.

Rose closed the door of the mercantile just as JT stepped up on the small porch.

"JT, nice to see you so soon," she joked, smiling at him even though her heartbeat rattled so loud she was afraid he'd hear.

"My pleasure," JT grinned. "Are you going to see Miss Addie? She put on the tea and is waiting on you."

"Yes, I'm on my way. I had to send a telegraph to my relatives. I didn't know Western Union was available until I entered the store and was so happy to find out there will be a full-fledged post office here in a few weeks."

"That's good to know. It will make a big difference. Let's hope Mill Ridge is next in line for a post office. If we had one, it may drive others to settle in our town sooner than later."

"That is certainly true. Well, good afternoon, then. I better be on my way."

Rose hurried down the street, hoping against all odds she could put her trust in Mr. Wheeler. If he told JT she had just paid for the materials, she was sure he wouldn't be too happy.

She wanted him to be happy.

Needed him to be so.

Without her.

Because of her lies, she was no longer capable of becoming the bride he longed for. Actually, she had never been meant for him.

Rose was truly saddened by this fact. Yet, it had to be so. For the town's sake as well as the reverends.

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Rose sloshed liquid over the tip of the fine teacup on to Miss Addie's homespun tablecloth. "I'm so sorry!" She pushed back the chair to stand up.

Miss Addie rose instead. "Please, stay seated. You are in no condition to help." She proceeded to the shelf in the outside room, returning with a box of Borax. "They claim this cleanser will clean even the toughest stains. We are about to find out if this is indeed true."

Rose watched in anticipation as her mentor mixed a small amount of the soapy flakes with a tiny bit of water, forming a paste. She applied the paste to the stain. "Yes, it will be interesting to see if this is what they claim," Rose told her, hoping it would work. She didn't mean to ruin the beautiful table cloth.

"Let's talk while this sets for a bit." Miss Addie sat back down, giving Rose all of her attention. "Let's begin with you, Rose. What is bothering you?"

"How do you know there is something wrong?"

"I can see it in your eyes. When have you ever not smiled? It's happening at this very moment."

Rose burst out in tears. Miss Addie moved quickly, gathering Rose in her arms. "Now, now, dear, it will all work itself out." The older woman handed her a hanky to wipe the tear stained face.

"I must apologize for the bad behavior. Miss Addie, I don't know what has gotten into me."

Her mentor sat back down, watching Rose carefully. She took a small sip of her tea, her brows creased. "I know Reverend Pope has been attracted to you, young lady, but, that should not make you upset. Any young lady would be honored to have such a man interested in her."

"I am upset because I do like JT, I mean Reverend Pope. I like him very much, but it is impossible for him to marry someone like me."

Miss Addie set her cup down. "What do you mean, someone like you? Rose, you are a delightful young lady. Any man would be honored to have you as a wife."

Her words brought more tears. After sniffling for a moment, Rose

tried hard to compose herself. “I am so sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten in to me. Maybe I am tired. Perhaps I’m not suitable to run a boarding house on my own. I could use some extra help, Miss Addie. When will you be sending the two girls you promised?”

“My apologies, Rose. I will send them to you within the week. Will it be more helpful if you had some help?”

“Yes, of course it would. With Elizabeth gone, I do have a lot of work to do.”

“Very well, then, two of the mail order brides will arrive next Thursday morning.”

“And, um, Miss Addie?” This was going to be the most difficult thing to ask for.

“Yes, Rose?”

She closed her eyes and swallowed. “Please send the best girl who you think will be well suited for Reverend Pope.”

Miss Addie almost spit out her tea before she composed herself. Her tea cup ratted before she set it down once again. “I beg your pardon? I thought you were interested in the Reverend? He sure seems interested in you?”

Rose straightened her back. She was done feeling sorry for herself. “I can’t marry him, Miss Addie. I am no good for him. It would only be a matter of time before my father found out and would annul the marriage.”

“Why ever would he do that?”

It was time to let someone know. She trusted Miss Addie. She had to relieve this burden once and for all and then get on with her life. “My father is not a good man. He is a wealthy man, Miss Addie. I’m sorry I didn’t mention this from the beginning, but, he wanted to arrange a marriage for me. I wasn’t about to accept this fate for me, so, I ran away to become a mail order bride, thinking anything would be better than his choice for me. Except you know what happened with that ordeal. Now, here I am, grateful that you’ve taken me and the other ladies from a terrible situation and given me a new lease on life. But, if I marry JT, er, the reverend, my father will find out. He has his ways of knowing everything. I’m surprised and relieved he

hasn't found me yet. The moment there is any indication he knows where I am, is when I leave here."

Miss Addie took her hand. "If he does find out, so what? You will already be married, there is nothing he can do but accept your new husband."

Rose rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You don't understand. Mill Ridge will be in danger. I love that town. He will bring his men and take over the town, much like the outlaws had done before, except with all his money, he will own the town and most everyone in it. I don't want to see this happen. He'll do it because I'm there and force me to go back to the ranch."

"He can do this?"

"Yes, and he will find a way, one way or another. He made me promise to marry the neighbor's son. I did so because I had no other choice. He told me if I didn't he would take Misty and have her slaughtered. The moment I found her a new home, I left."

"Who is Misty?"

"My beloved horse. I took her to Dallas and sold her to a family that was looking for an affordable horse. At first I was going to have her stabled there to be taken care of but when I overheard they were looking for a good horse, I knew I had to send Misty to a good home instead of living her life in a livery. I pray they have taken good care of her." Another tear fell, this time Rose didn't wipe it away.

"Rose, honey, it will be okay. Have you told the reverend any of this?"

"No. Please, this must stay between us. I won't have anyone else in danger of my father's wrath."

"I understand. Why don't you go lie down until the reverend comes back for you. Take a much needed nap. Come now, dear. You can rest in my room."

"Please, don't tell JT. I care too much about him. I paid for the materials for the church so he can get it finished quicker and get out of the boarding house. It's too much to have him there day and night. I keep falling deeper and deeper knowing in my heart it will never work. The reason I came here was not only to see you but to ask for a

bride for him, also. You can see now, it will never work for me to be his bride. I have to keep him and Mill Ridge safe from my father's wrath."

"We don't have to discuss this right now, you are too distraught."

Rose stopped. She turned to Miss Addie. "I'm not distraught. This is my life and it is real. My father will come and everyone is in danger. I know how cruel he can be. I won't allow this to happen. Please, Miss Addie, send me away to California or to the East Coast as a mail order bride, but send me far away from this place. I thought I would be able to hide here but now I realize nothing is sacred from my father. My heart has been given to one man and I know I will never have him. It is time to stop this foolishness of thinking I can stay here and live in Texas without my father finding out but that is impossible. I can't bear if anything happens to those I love."

Miss Addie wrapped an arm around Rose and led her to the bedroom. She covered Rose with a quilt, speaking in low tones until her eyes began to close. Maybe this was what she needed, a rest from everything for a few moments.

Even so, nothing would change for her. She was doomed.

Chapter 4

"It is the trouble that never comes that causes the loss of sleep." -Chas. Austin Bates

"Shhh, we need to talk. Let's go to the porch," Miss Addie told JT when he went to collect Rose.

He looked around. "Where is Rose?"

"She's in my room resting."

JT became concerned. "Is she ill?" She seemed fine when they spoke outside the mercantile, although her cheeks had been a bit flushed. Maybe she was coming down with something.

"Nothing like that. After you, Mr. Pope." Miss Addie closed the door to the boarding house behind her. She began to speak once she had JT's full attention.

"What is going on?"

The matron of the boarding house steepled her fingers. "I'm afraid your materials for the church will be delivered sooner than you realize. There won't be no stopping it now."

"What do you mean?"

"Rose paid for all of the materials herself, believing you didn't have the money to do so."

JT swore under his breath. "She did what?"

"I told you this scheme of yours will never work. That poor girl is beside herself, worried her father will come to Mill Ridge and destroy the town."

"She's probably right about that. Except I never told him of her location. The last telegram I sent said nothing about where she is."

"She asked me to find you a mail order bride. Your plan to win her over is back-firing fast."

“She did what?” JT paced back and forth on the porch. This was going all wrong.

“I hate to be the burden of bad news but you knew when you started fabricating a story like this one, sooner or later it would blow up in your face.”

JT stretched his neck, looking up at the darkening clouds. “You were right all along, Miss Addie. When I came to you and told you how much Rose meant to me, you said to tell her the truth. I should’ve listened.”

Miss Addie placed her hand on his arm. “It’s never too late to be honest. I know you were worried and had every honorable intention to do the right thing. The idea of replacing the reverend was a bit much, in my opinion.”

JT felt cornered. “You didn’t stop me, Miss Addie.”

“Because I knew she would run away if she found out that you were sent here to take her back to her family ranch. That’s why after thinking about the situation as a whole, I realized I didn’t want to lose her, either. Not to go back to a family whose sole purpose was to use her for the wrong reasons. All of these girls mean the world to me and I truly want what is best for them. Even if I have to throw out a fib or two in the process.”

“You did suggest that I try to get to know her first before burdening Rose with everything.”

“Yes, and it so happened you were standing right here when I got the telegram that the reverend would be taking care of his ill sister and would not be available for six weeks or so. Your suggestion to take his place was a ludicrous idea, and going along with it was probably a mistake.” Miss Addie smiled, knowing she couldn’t entirely blame this situation all on him.

She had agreed to allow him to take the reverend’s place until Rose got to know him better. Living in the boarding house was Miss Addie’s idea but JT didn’t think either of them thought it through. “You did go along with the idea,” he mentioned. “What do we do now? How in the world do I fix this mess I made?”

Miss Addie paced back and forth. “I do believe you have gotten me

in a dire situation. I've always been above board and honest, well, there have been a few times when I've worked things to my advantage. Let me think awhile."

"I can't marry anyone but Rose."

There.

He said the words out loud.

He didn't care if they paraded ten mail order brides in front of him, all he wanted was his precious Rose.

Miss Addie turned to him. "I am positive Rose feels the same way. Did you know her father threatened to have her dear horse slaughtered if she didn't go through with the marriage?"

JT inhaled deeply. "I didn't know. She loved her horse more than anything in the world." He saw in his mind's eye her racing across the range, bringing a tug to his heart. "I wouldn't put it past the old man to threaten the things she loved. I've heard stories of the way he treated some of his ranch hands, who now work for me and my brothers."

"Luckily, she was smart enough to leave with her horse. Her intention was to board the horse in Dallas, but then she found a family to take her in. It's a shame she had to give up the one thing she loved most."

"If there is any way to get her horse back, I'll find it. Maybe then I can be redeemed for making such a mess of this whole situation."

"It will all work out, you'll see. I'm not certain I will send any of the other girls yet, even though she does need some help at the boarding house. I must figure out how to stall things for some time." JT watched as she tilted her head and tapped a finger to her chin before she spoke again. "I'm not sure if sending a mail order bride for you would help your case by making Rose a wee bit jealous or hurt you even more. Let's let the mighty hand of God guide us. It's time to place it there instead of taking matters in to our own hands."

JT turned to stare at Miss Addie. Was she getting soft? He had heard stories of how tough as nails she was, helping to build the town of Wichita Falls up from a run down rail road town. It was why he had gone to her in the first place. The talk was she had helped to rescue

the mail order brides, all nineteen of them. While some of them left to go back to their homes, others stayed behind, placing their trust in the woman standing in front of him to find them a decent, honest husband. “Perhaps I need to trust in something besides my own self. After all, I am supposed to be a man of God.”

Miss Addie tsked. “Mr. Pope, do you think I have gotten this far in life without the hand of God guiding me? There are times when everything was against me, when I was afraid to take another step forward. Then I reached out and remembered that God can move mountains, no matter how big they are. Do you know what I do? I raise my fist in the air and I tell them mountains to get out of my way, God’s beloved daughter is coming through!”

He had never heard her speak this way. It gave him hope. “I’m sure going to need him to move these mountains out of my way.”

“Mr. Pope, God will never fail you, but he isn’t going to do it alone. It will take hard work and perseverance on your part. When you have done all you can do, then rest. Always give it to him.”

JT nodded. Perhaps it was time he started having the kind of faith of this amazing woman standing here. She had more history in this town than most anyone. “I’ll give it a hell of a try. Pardon me, ma’am.”

Miss Addie shook her head before a big grin erupted. “I’ll go get Rose.” She turned back to JT. “Remember, Mr. Pope, when you put it in God’s hands, don’t be a fool and take it back out.”

“Thank you, Miss Addie. For everything.”

JT leaned against the porch railing and stuffed hands deep in his pockets. He knew the best thing was to be honest with Rose and tell her why he was really here.

When she followed Miss Addie out of the boarding house, his throat constricted and his lungs tightened up. Was it possible for his heart to beat so fast? Her eyes, red rimmed and sad, tugged at his emotions like nothing he had ever felt before. JT reached out a hand. He needed to touch her pale skin, bring life back to those beautiful eyes. He tried to swallow the lump in his throat. “Rose, are you alright? You look ill?” How long would he have to lie to her, he wondered with disgust.

JT was starting to hate his deception.

Her eyes went to Miss Addie and back to him, unsure of what to say. “I’m, uh, a bit under the weather. I suppose the long ride wore me out,” she lied right back at him, her eyes downcast so he didn’t see the truth, even though he knew why she was so sad.

“We can take it easy going back to Mill Ridge. Let me help you on to the horse.” JT nodded to Miss Addie as Rose gave her a hug. Even though she didn’t need much help, he still lifted her on to the saddle. When she smiled at him, her eyes still sad, JT wanted to take her in his arms and hold her close, promising the world.

Yet, he knew she would never understand. How was he going to have the courage to be honest with her and let her know how he cared for her since he saw her riding in a field so long ago? Would she believe him or think it was a lie her father fabricated to get her home? Sooner or later he had to tell her what happened to their fathers, even though her own parents had discouraged him from revealing the truth until she was safe at home on the ranch. They had said she would never believe it anyway.

No, they had wanted him to force her to come home, even if he had to marry her in the interim, by causing a scandal. They were both desperate, afraid of what would happen if her father’s health worsened. Rose’s parents thought that Rose would be their salvation, again not caring what was best for her. He had looked at both her parents before riding away, the only promise made to find her.

That was all he had promised. The rest of the reason he was still here was because of his feelings for her. That’s why he was still here, faking a priest’s livelihood and making sure she was going to be okay. Was he any better than her parents?

As they rode side by side along the trail, JT wondered if maybe he should go back home and leave her here to find her own way. She loved this town she now called home, he could tell. Going back to the ranch to live under her father’s demands would cause too much unhappiness. If he took her back now, would she even consider marrying him? Although they got to spend time together, was it enough?

He remembered the only time she was truly happy was when she was on her horse, riding the ranch's borders. JT had been disillusional, thinking he could bring that back to her.

If she married him, the two ranches would be combined, making her father and mother happy.

How would it make Rose feel?

Would he be able to live with himself if he forced her to live a life she was not happy with?

The thought of having to leave here because of him had made her eyes so sad it broke him in two.

"Rose?"

She turned, her skin beginning to glow once more now that her face was in the wind. She loved to ride, he knew.

"You love living here in Mill Ridge, don't you?"

"Of course I do. Why would you ask such a question?"

A puzzled look came over her but he needed to know she would always want to be here. "It's a good town, the people are friendly here. I'm sure you would always be safe in Mill Ridge."

"That's an odd thing to say, JT."

He sighed. "I'm afraid I may have to go to Dallas for some business for a week or so. I was hoping when I came back, you would still be here."

"Why would you say such a thing? Who have you been talking to?" Rose glared at him. He rubbed at the light stubble on his chin, which was unusual since he shaved daily. Even his grooming was askew lately.

She was suspicious and had every right to be. "While you rested, Miss Addie mentioned you wanted to become a mail order bride, that's all. I thought, we, were, well, I did promise to marry you someday." He wasn't sure how this conversation should go.

Rose blinked. "JT, I know you did but it is impossible and we both know why."

"Why is it impossible?" Maybe this was the opening he needed to tell her the truth. He had a strong feeling if he did, she'd high-tail it out of town faster than the whistle blew on an outbound train.

Rose stopped her mare dead in the middle of the trail, twisting her body to turn and stare directly in his eyes. “I know you were never serious about marrying me, JT. We are friends, that’s all. I’m happy to be friends. You need a good, honest woman who will take the leadership role in your church to help others and always stand by your side. I’m not sure I will be staying in Mill Ridge, so how can I marry you even if you hadn’t been joking?”

JT wanted to be honest. He wanted it to end right here, right now. He ached to tell her the truth.. A hand reached out to do so but he pulled back.

If he did, she’d be gone on the next train. Gone from his life forever. She had a good life here, away from her parents, away from the people who wanted to force her into something she didn’t want.

He saw the love of freedom shining in her eyes. She went from a scared, unloved girl to an amazing woman living in Mill Ridge, caring for others and enjoying the comradery of others.

JT was a fool.

His love for her had been one-sided.

He knew he had to let her go.

A cloud formed ahead, way up in the sky. JT looked at it, staring hard at the way it moved over the sky in all its brilliance. As if it were a sign that he was on the right path.

Perhaps Miss Addie was right to place it in God’s hands after all. Was that God, telling him he has to let her go if he truly loved her the way he said he does?

Only JT knew the answer.

It was time for him to go back home, to let Rose keep her secrets here and live her life fully, without having to worry about her father or the ranch ever again. He was going to make sure it happened. Sadness and regret encompassed him so much he wanted to kick in his heels and ride away this very moment.

But first, he was going to give back to her the one thing she loved most of all.

Chapter 5

"Leave no stone unturned." -Edward Bulwer Lytton

The two rode in silence the rest of the way to Mill Ridge. Rose, deep in thought, struggled with the idea of being honest with JT and telling him who she really was. Would it matter to him? He was a man of the cloth, righteous and dignified, always kind to others and doing the right thing. Would her lies turn him away? Rose didn't know if she could stand being disregarded by him right now. Her head was filled with so many what ifs, she was more confused than ever.

"A penny for your thoughts?" His gentle voice touched her soul as if he already knew what was on her mind.

Should she tell him? How would he react if she explained she was a rich heiress who was being stalked by her father, who wanted her explicitly for a forced marriage to combine two ranches? How would a country reverend take such news? He would run as fast and as far from her as he could, she was certain.

No. He said he had to go to Dallas for business. She would think this through while he was gone before making any rash decisions. Even the mail order part, for both of them. She'd have to tell Miss Addie she wasn't ready to leave here as a mail order bride yet.

After her recent nap, she had a few quiet moments to process everything. There was no reason to jump the wagon yet and assume her father would find her. No one was at risk until he did. When that day approached, she'd run as fast as she could before anyone was harmed.

In all honesty, Rose didn't want to leave Mill Ridge. Not yet. Was it possible for her to stay a little while longer and enjoy the time with JT before he settled in with a new wife? Because sooner or later he'd

want to start a family. If only it could be her, but she knew it wasn't ever going to happen. Was she being selfish because she didn't want to leave this life yet in order to spend more time with him?

For now, she had to make the best of things. "I'm thinking how much I will miss seeing you every morning when you leave on business."

JT grinned. "I was thinking the same thing."

Rose laughed out loud. "You'd miss seeing yourself every morning?"

He followed suit, his head back, his laughter booming across the prairie. "Sweet Rose, I will miss you."

They both were smiling as they followed the path that would lead them to Mill Ridge when a rider came barrelling around a curve in the road. "Reverend Pope!" He pulled back the reins, stopping his horse too quickly, throwing dust and dirt in the air.

JT straightened, all business. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Where have you been? Mr. and Mrs. Manslow are waiting at the church yard to have the youngun' baptised. Been waiting for over an hour, worried the baby will not get through the gates of heaven until you place holy water on her forehead."

"Let's get a move on, then, young man. You ride back and tell her I was delayed and am on my way. There are some chairs inside the church in the far corner. Bring them out and I'll be there with my bible in twenty minutes. Be careful when you enter the church, there are still repairs that need done."

Rose nudged her mare to go faster, entering Mill Ridge in a cloud of dust. The rider was ahead of them, hopping off his horse and running in to the half built church for seats. She heard him yell out to the small crowd standing there, huddled together, waiting. Two others went inside to bring out chairs and a few benches.

JT and Rose stopped at the livery. "I'll take care of the horses, JT. You go get your bible, I'll be along shortly."

JT tipped his hat. "Much obliged. I need to prepare something to say for an infant baptism."

Rose frowned. "Since I'm sure there is no holy water in the church

yet, if you need something to use to baptise the child, there is rosewater on a shelf in the kitchen. Help yourself."

JT left the horses with her as if he was aware she knew what to do with them. Rose thought that was strange since he didn't know her at all. She shrugged, loosening the saddles and pulling them off with the help of one of the stable hands. She thanked the hand as he began to walk them around the stables. Rose hurried back to the church to watch the proceedings. She wanted to support JT in one of his first jobs as a reverend in Mill Ridge.

As Rose stood among the crowd, she noticed more townsfolk were starting to arrive. Some sat in the wooden chairs and worn wooden benches the young men brought from the unfinished church, others gathered around the woman holding the small infant dressed in a crème-colored christening gown. The baby's cheeks were rosy. Her long, dark eyelashes fluttered against pale skin as the infant slept in her mother's arms. An ache tugged at Rose's heartstrings as she wondered what it would be like to have JT's child.

Shaking herself, she directed her attention to the man running down the steps of the church, his hat flying through the air at the last moment. He reached out and caught it, crushing the material before shoving it back on.

Rose giggled. The poor man was frazzled. She stared at JT as he stood in front of the couple, paging through his bible, looking pretty darn handsome in his dark colored jacket and white pressed shirt.

He looked up to scan the crowd. She knew he was looking for her so she lifted her hand to get his attention. Instant relief flashed across his face when he saw she was there. No one else would notice his nervous demeanor but she was starting to be able to read him quite well. He coughed, then cleared his throat.

"Good day, everyone. I guess this is my official appearance as your minister of God." JT's voice cracked when he said those words. Rose wondered if she should break through the crowd to stand beside him for support. He seemed awfully nervous for a man who was used to speaking to crowds of followers. Instead of drawing attention by interrupting his speech, she warily kept her eye on him, silently

urging him on.

"We are gathered here today in front of God and everyone in this wonderful town of Mill Ridge to baptise Miss Regina Manslow, infant daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Rufus Manslow standing right here before us. God said to bring forth the little ones for they may perish if they don't get baptised when young."

Rose continued to stare at JT's face. Small beads of sweat formed along his forehead. He was trying to quote from the bible but she was familiar with the passage he spoke of and knew there was nothing in the good book that said a baby would perish if not baptised. Was this his first time in front of a crowd? Rose had no idea but it appeared he wasn't as familiar with the good book as he should be for a preacher man.

Ten minutes later, the small infant's eyes fluttered to life. She was ready to eat and began to amuse the crowd with her little cries and gurgles. JT closed the pages of the bible and looked up. Rose saw in his face he realized he was boring the crowd to tears with his long rendition of reading Psalms verses.

"Get on with it, Reverend," someone shouted. "The little one wants food!"

A few laughed while some tried to hush the spokesperson. JT was not offended by any means. She saw the determination in his steel gray eyes. "I baptise you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost!" He opened the small bottle of rosewater, splashing the liquid on his finger.

JT made the sign of the cross on the child's forehead, then looked up to the clouds and grimaced. A sigh of relief washed over the crowd. Someone called out it was about time he finished. Others nodded their heads.

"Amen!"

"Amen, let's eat, too!"

JT spoke to the parents while Rose made her way through the dispersing crowd. She needed to get back to the boarding house to start dinner but wanted him to know she was proud of his first speech even if it was a bit outlandish. As the little one began to scream at the

top of its lungs, the parents excused themselves in order to attend to the infant.

"I take it you never held a baptism before?"

JT shook his head. "Was it that obvious?"

"To me it was. I've been to numerous ones in Dal, I mean, back home." Rose hadn't wanted that to slip. He was distracted so she was glad he didn't notice she almost gave away her home town.

He tucked the bible under his arm, taking her by the elbow. "Well, it all worked out. We can thank the good Lord for a beautiful day. Let me walk you back, I know you must get dinner started for the renters."

JT walked her back to the boarding house, speaking to a few of the townsfolk on the way as they thanked him for the ceremony. "Much obliged," he told them all.

Leaving her at the door, he gently squeezed her arm before letting it go. "Thank you for being here."

Rose turned to find him staring at her, the intensity so strong she didn't want to turn away. He was a man of God, he really needed to stop doing this to her. She stepped back on purpose, needing to be proper even if she didn't truly want to. "Any time. We are friends, always."

JT tipped his hat. "Always. I'll be at the church working most of the afternoon. I'll try to make sure I get back in time for dinner."

"You mentioned you must go out of town, JT. When will you be leaving?"

He sighed. "In the early hours of the morning. I have to get to Wichita Fall's train depot before the rooster crows to catch the first train out."

"It will be nice if they do run tracks to Mill Ridge someday. I heard talk of them doing so sometime next year."

"That's a good thing." JT leaned in towards her. Rose thought he would kiss her.

She took another step back. It was ridiculous for him to try to do so in this small town when everyone was out and about. Imagine the gossip a kiss by the reverend would cause.

When he saw the look on her face, he realized what he was about to do. She honestly didn't think he deliberately tried to embarrass her in public. "I'm so sorry, Rose. Yet, in a way I'm not. You make me want to kiss you every time I see you."

"JT, we are friends. Stop it right now." Her face began to burn as she felt the heat rushing to her cheeks.

He took another step back and grinned. "I can hardly contain myself. It isn't my fault you are so beautiful to me."

His words made Rose giddy. She watched him make his way to the church as she whispered under her breath, "You are beautiful to me, too."

He turned and smiled as if he heard her even though she knew that was impossible. What was happening here? Was he charming her? She didn't have the ability to stop him, it seemed. Was he doing this because he was leaving and truly would miss her?

How in the world was she going to get over him when he was teasing and torturing her at the same time? He needed to marry someone that would be perfect as a reverend's wife. She honestly didn't want to go away from Mill Ridge and yet knew it was for the best because some day her father would find her here. It was too close to Dallas. She hadn't thought this through and now she was in love with a town and its people and a man of God. Her heart broke in two at the thought of having to give all of this up.

For now, all she wanted to do was spend the little time she had left with him.

Checking the time, Rose threw her apron over her head and began to make the evening meal. As she kneaded the dough she set aside earlier to form a loaf of bread, her mind was on JT the entire time. She knew sooner of later their *friendship* had to end. It was only fair he learn to love someone who would make him a wonderful wife. Someone who would not be a burden but who would be clean and wholesome as the wife of a man of God. Someone special who hadn't lied through her teeth.

It wasn't fair. She wanted to be the one to become his wife. It saddened her terribly to realize what she had to give up. But for now,

for this evening ahead, she would cherish their time together and make it the best ever.

Rose giggled when a puff of flour clouded her vision. She slapped the bread into the metal pan, then adjusted the heat so it would bake. She loved this modern oven, even if it was a learning curve until she learned how to use it. Her food wasn't as good as Elizabeth's was, but she had gotten many compliments since her partner had left.

Rose missed her friend. Elizabeth was living on a ranch with her husband about a half hours ride away. Rose would have to make it a point to go see her while JT was gone. At least it would take her mind off of him being away. Maybe Elizabeth could guide her on what to do because she was so confused. On one hand she was determined to leave here so JT would get married to a good woman and live a clean life. On the other hand, that same thought devastated her. She was changing her mind every other hour, causing her head to hurt terribly.

Two hours later the door opened and closed. Rose knew it was JT even though there were other renters who lived here. She listened to the sound of his familiar boots as they walked towards her. Not able to turn around as she stirred the stew for tonight's meal, she didn't have to look at him to know he was grinning from ear to ear, thinking he was sneaking up on her.

As he came closer, Rose felt the warmth of him. She squeezed her eyes closed and giggled. "JT, I know it's you. A man should never sneak up on a woman when she has a wooden spoon in a boiling pot!"

He didn't speak at first.There was a small movement as he presented her with a small bunch of field flowers clutched in his hand. "For the prettiest woman I know."

A blush crossed Rose's cheeks. Shyly, she inhaled the flowery scent. The pitter-patter of feet on the stairs drew Rose's attention away from the flowers. She didn't want to be caught with JT's arm almost around her, yet she wasn't able to step away. The stove was in front of her and he stood too close behind her.

He would not move until she took the flowers. "Thank you," she whispered.

He took a step back and bowed slightly, aware there were others

now in the room. “Flowers for the hostess,” he told them, addressing two of the renters who walked through to go to the parlor.

Rose worried they would think less of her, or that she was flirting with the reverend. Yet, they never noticed. They were polite and didn’t say a word. As if it were the most natural thing in the world for a man of God to bring flowers to her.

She needed to stop worrying about every little thing. This confusion she felt when ever he was close at hand had to stop. She would have to make the best of things, so she nodded and smiled. “Thank you, sir. They are beautiful.”

Rose didn’t look to see his reaction. She busied herself in the kitchen, taking the bread from the oven to set it on the table. When she turned around, JT was gone. She gave a sigh of relief as she found an old jar to place the flowers in. Setting them in the center of the table, Rose stood back, wiping her hands on the front of the apron.

Satisfied, she rang the bell for dinner. Everyone hustled to the table, standing behind their chairs to wait for the others. The aroma of delicious fresh baked bread wafted through the room. “Where is Reverend Pope?”

Grumbling followed. The crowd was mostly a kind bunch but they were hungry. After a few moments, JT came down the steps smiling as if he weren’t the last person to be seated.

They all took hands while JT said the meal prayer. Then someone else finished it off by being silly. “Good food, good meat! Good God, Let’s eat!”

The room got silent. Every person there turned to look at the reverend. JT stared at the lot of them before throwing his head back to roar with laughter. He pulled his chair back to be the first to sit down. Everyone else followed suit, laughing along. The dinner hour, mostly quiet and serene was jovial tonight.

Except she felt it in her bones that something was wrong. Rose kept sneaking peeks at JT until he would look at her with those intense eyes. They were heated yet she saw an anger and sadness that worried her. When he realized she was watching him, she would lower her own to the plate. Rose was troubled. Maybe if they took a stroll

outside she would be able to get to the bottom of things. “I am thinking a walk through town would be heavenly this evening.”

The moment the words were said, everyone agreed. “I’ll go,” was heard one after the other. Rose looked up to find the reverend immersed in his food, not paying attention to anyone around him.

“Reverend?” Rose raised her voice.

JT sat back, obviously unaware he was being stared at by everyone at the table. “I’m sorry, I was not paying attention.”

“Well, my goodness Reverend, what were you doing, day dreaming?” One of the renters asked, cackling afterwards.

JT looked right at Rose. “I’m afraid I was indeed daydreaming. Forgive me. What was it you wanted?”

A few heads turned her way when she found herself speechless. Oh, dear! She didn’t want anyone thinking she was not capable of doing her job as proprietor of this boarding house.

She dabbed the napkin on her mouth and placed it on her lap. “We are all going for a walk this evening and would like to know if you would like to walk along?”

JT nodded but said no more. When Rose began to clear off the table, he was still sitting at the table, staring at the empty plate.

Deciding to ignore him for now, Rose began to clean up, accepting help from a few of the renters. Whenever they walked, everyone got excited. “Maybe I should announce a walk each evening,” she joked. “That way there would be help to clean up on a daily basis.”

JT grinned, even though she knew he was distracted. “I better go get ready for our walk,” he announced, pushing back the chair.

“Reverend Pope?” She used his formal name, knowing there were others listening to the conversation. Not a day went by that someone wasn’t bending their ear to hear any type of news to spread around to others.

He stopped and turned. “What is it, Rose?”

“Is everything okay? You seem, distracted.”

JT avoided her eyes this time. “I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

Rose watched as he went up the stairs to his private room. There was something wrong with JT this evening. He left here earlier in a

happy mood and now he was totally distracted. Had something happened in the last hour or two?

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JT slammed his fist in to the palm of his hand, turning and twisting it until he actually grimaced. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he tried to steady his heart rate. What had he done!

Gave his blessing to a man who wanted to pursue Miss Rose, that's what. JT was sickened by the fact he let it happen. When he had first arrived with a bunch of flowers for Rose, he had to admit to being the happiest man alive, looking forward to the evening he was determined to spend with her before he left for Dallas.

As he dreamed about a heavenly evening for the two of them, there was a single knock on the door of his private room. He had let in the golden-haired man who had rented a room for about a week now. JT hadn't thought much about the quiet man who had been hired by the Sheriff to help with some of the construction work in town.

The man's name was Sandy Logan. What kind of name was that? He uttered under his breath so no one would hear him through the thin walls. His blood boiled at the thought of the man touching his Rose. Why had he said there was nothing between the two of them. It was a lie!

Sandy Logan looked him in the eye and told him he had an interest in Rose but noticed the two of them were always together. He didn't want to step on another man's boots, that was the cowboy code, he had told JT as he promptly asked if there was a chance he may ask the lady to the hoe-down on Saturday night.

At first JT had wanted to take his bare hands and wrap them around the man's neck. Yet, he saw in Sandy a man who seemed like a hard worker, honest and above board wanting to truly pursue this beautiful woman.

How could he stand in the way?

Because sooner or later she would find out how he had deceived her. As much as he wanted to be with Rose, he wanted her to be

happy. He realized he didn't want her to be forced to live a life with him no matter the cost. Only her free will of loving him would do. He would take a step back, allowing Rose to determine her own life instead of trying to force her to love him and marry a man who had been a fake and a fraud.

JT hung his head in shame. Defeat roared through his body like an out of control steam train. His infatuation for the beautiful woman he admired from his ranch next to hers had made him think he deserved her at any cost. JT had it in his head he had waited for her forever and she should be his. He had been so wrong. She didn't deserve a heartless, self-centered man who thought only of himself.

It took all his strength to muster the courage to get up and walk downstairs to the others, who were patiently waiting.

He placed his hat on his head, nodding to the others and led the way outside. As Rose came up beside him, he kept his hands to himself. Normally, he would place a hand on her elbow but now realized it had been a possessive thing, making sure everyone knew she was in his care.

He had to make sure Rose made the decisions from now on no matter how much it killed him to do so. JT slowed his step, allowing Sandy Logan to replace him beside Rose. As he watched from behind, it tore him apart when she swung her head back in complete surprise to see where he was.

Knowing she didn't dare mention the fact he wasn't beside her any longer, he watched as her shoulders slumped in disappointment. Then in an amazing act of recovery, Rose sent one defiant look his way before taking Sandy Logan's arm.

JT held a fist at his side, forcing himself to look away. He drifted further back in the crowd, his eyes on the two the whole time. His heart sank when their two heads came close together while they talked. Twice, Rose turned his way, scouring the group to see where he was. When she laid eyes on him, relief flooded her face. She didn't conceal her feelings well, JT knew. It was one of the reasons he fell for her. She had to stop depending on him to always be there. It was time Rose made that decision on her own without anyone bending her

heart this way and that.

She was so giving, her sweet laughter and demeanor was breathtaking as he watched her walk in the lead.

JT let the crowd go ahead while he slowed his pace to a crawl. Soon he stopped, letting her out of his sight. It almost shattered his world right there. JT contemplated disappearing inside the saloon, wanting to drown his sorrows in booze. It wouldn't be proper to find the town reverend in the saloon late at night, or any time for that matter.

Instead, he made his way back to the boarding house. He had one more place to go, one more thing to do before letting Rose live her life to the fullest without any man to stand in her way.

It was time to fetch Misty and bring her home to Rose.

Chapter 6

“Things won are done; joy's soul lies in the doing.”
-William Shakespeare

JT was exhausted, yet unable to get a decent nights sleep. Each time his lids got heavy, he saw her beautiful face smiling at him. He tossed all night until no longer able to lie in bed waiting for the sun to come up.

He got dressed, carrying his boots in one hand while making his way downstairs. Not sure how long he’d be gone, JT left money on the table with a note to Rose.

This was the last time he’d step foot in this boarding house.

He hadn’t expected to leave like this so he wanted to make sure the room he rented was paid for at least for another two weeks. That would give her plenty of time to rent it out to someone else. Maybe even to the new reverend, whenever he got here.

JT slung his saddle bag over his shoulder, turning the knob on the front door. He took one step outside when he noticed her on the porch, sitting, waiting.

“You were going to leave without saying goodbye? I thought we meant more to each other than that? I thought we were friends?” Her voice was a mere whisper yet it was the loudest sound he ever heard.

JT moved to sit beside her. He took her hand, which gripped the wooden arm of the bench as if it were her lifeline. “I’m sorry, Rose. I’m sorry about not walking with you last night.”

Even though he meant every single word, she refused to acknowledge his words and lashed out. “You told Sandy he could court me, that you had no intention to do so, that the only reason you

watched over me was to keep me safe because Miss Addie asked you to. I know you and I are friends, but JT, that was so harsh and hurtful to hear."

Even though darkness still fell upon them, he saw the pain in her eyes. JT wanted to take her in his arms yet he forced himself not to. He wasn't the right man for her. Maybe Sandy was, even though the thought darkened his mood. "I have to leave this morning, Rose. It's for the best, although I'll be back in a few days or weeks, not sure how long it will take because I plan to see the church finished. Sandy is a good man. He'll keep an eye on things here and make sure you come to no harm." He was afraid to mention how determined he was to find Misty in case he failed at that, too.

Rose pulled her hand away and crossed her arms over her body. "It's not the same, even if you were doing your Godly duty. Go on, JT, ride out of here, good riddance."

JT stood. "You don't mean those words, Rose. I do care about you." *More than you will ever know!*

He picked up her pale hand and brought it to his lips, kissing each finger softly like he had done in the meadow before.

Her soft lashes fluttered across her cheeks. Rose bit her bottom lip, trying to hide her hurt as best she could.

JT needed to leave.

Now.

He turned to go when she jumped up from the rocker.

"JT." The longing in her voice slammed into his gut like a hard punch from one of the tough cowboys who worked on the ranch.

"I'll see you again, Rose."

"I don't care what is proper and what is not, if this is goodbye, I want to remember you at any cost."

Before he knew what happened, Rose wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. Her mouth met his as a surge of need so strong ran its course through his whole body.

JT wanted to stop. He had to leave and yet his arms had a mind of their own. They went around her, holding on to her softness, wanting to remember how she felt in his arms. He kissed her over and over, his

lips against hers, trying to take in every single part of her that was pushing against him until he came to his senses enough to force them apart.

JT knew this wasn't what was best for Rose. Sandy was better for her. Even though his heart ached so bad it was ripping in two, he held her at arms length. "Stop, Rose. Save your kisses for Sandy. He'll make you a good husband."

Rose cried out. "Husband! How dare you know what I want!" She lifted a hand, then cringed when the palm connected to his cheek.

JT let her go and stepped back. He had no right to kiss her like he did. It would just prolong a relationship that wasn't meant to be. This wasn't fair to his lovely Rose. He would love her from afar, as he always had.

Except as he rode out of town, the thought of her being with another man almost drove him to turn around and bare his soul.

What stopped him from turning back was the thought of telling her the whole truth. The moment he did, she would hate him for lying. For pretending to be someone when all she would see was he came to take her back to her father and the ranch she hated with every breath in her body.

The thought of her hating him kept him from turning back. He continued to ride away from Mill Ridge. JT had a train to catch. It was going to be a long ride.

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Rose gripped the wooden railing with shaking hands, watching in disbelief as he rode out of town, never looking back as if she never meant anything to him. The one man she had fallen in love was gone. Why? He had been hiding something from her and she intended to get to the bottom of things.

There was no way a man was able to kiss a woman like he did and walk away for no reason! Rose may be a bit careless and some say reckless but her mind was perfectly fine.

She needed a woman's perspective and since Elizabeth was married

now and happily living on the ranch her husband built for her, Rose immediately made plans to visit right away.

She hurried inside to get breakfast started even though it was way too early. Kneading bread for the evening meal would take her mind off of things, or so she thought.

By the time breakfast was served and the brunt of the renters went about their business for the day, Rose cleared the table as fast as she could. If she were to see her old friend, she had to get the buggy moving.

Just as she was about to leave, Sandy waved from across the street.

"Hello," she said politely, remembering their conversation from last night on the group walk. He had asked to come courting but she had held him off, telling him she wasn't ready yet and to mention it in another week as she would have an answer then. In the meantime, Rose planned to find out from a married expert how to win the heart of the man she loved.

Tired of being scared of her father's wrath, it was time Rose made up her mind to be honest with JT. Even if she had to leave here afterwards, she owed him the truth. She gazed at the street of Mill Ridge as she directed her buggy away from town. This was her home. She didn't want to give it up. Her father would find her sooner or later, it was a matter of time.

Instead of him bringing his wrath to her, perhaps she needed to go back to the ranch and stand up to him. Yet, how would she get the courage to do so? It was something she had little of right now. Her world was turning in to one big lie and honestly, Rose had enough. She needed to speak to her dear friend and muster up the courage to face down all her demons.

The fact was her father was so powerful it took all her bravery away. It was fine to say she needed to face up to her lies and tell the truth or even confront the man who kept fear alive but he had the power to wreck lives and she loved the folks in Mill Ridge. He would go after everyone here to hurt her. Confronting him now may be the worst thing to do.

Her head began to pound. Rose rode out of town, hoping against all

odds Elizabeth could help shed some light on what to do. Her mentor was smart and full of sass, not afraid to stand up to anyone for that matter.

When the outlaws came into the boarding house that day and threatened the children she was in charge of, Elizabeth had marched right up to their outlaw father and demanded he take her along to care for the children. If it hadn't been for her husband rescuing them, God only knows how her fate would have turned out. But she had been brave. Elizabeth had been filled with courage.

It was the one thing Rose needed so desperately. Right now, the thought of standing up to her father made her want to run as far away as possible. Yet, on the other hand, if she would just do it, maybe he would finally understand she wouldn't bend to his ways. She was of age now and didn't have to listen to him even if he tried to force her to stay and marry the next door neighbor's son.

By the time Rose reached the Holloway Ranch, her head was spinning so much spots formed in front of her eyes.

Then she saw Elizabeth, who ran out of the house, little Katie in tow. "Rose! Oh, how I've missed you!"

"I've missed you so much!" Rose jumped down, hugging her friend. A little set of sun kissed hands wrapped around her skirt. "I missed you too," Katie mimicked. Rose bent down to pick up Katie and swing her back and forth.

The trio strolled around the property as Elizabeth showed her the ranch, a proud wife and mother now. "Now, let's have some tea," she announced, taking Rose by the hand.

After serving tea, Rose and Elizabeth chatted while little Katie drank from her tiny cup, a little pinky pointing out. She wanted to be like the grown-ups. "Katie, it's time to tidy your room while Rose and I chat," her friend told her newly adopted daughter.

Rose propped two elbows on the table, her face in her hands. "I'm sorry I interrupted your daily routine and yet I'm not. It's great to see you."

Elizabeth set her tea cup down. "You are welcome here any time. I'm surprised you waited this long. Katie has gone to her room. Now

tell me what is wrong?"

"You always know when there is something going on, don't you, Elizabeth?"

She nodded. "I see so much sadness in those beautiful blue eyes of yours I want to help take away the pain. Is it the Reverend?"

Rose burst in tears, spilling out the whole story to her friend, even the part about her father and who she was. A sense of relief flooded through her whole body, realizing she waited way too long to let it all out but Elizabeth was the only one she could trust with her secrets.

A surprised and shocked Elizabeth took Rose in her arms, rocking her back and forth as if she were a small child. "Oh, dear, why hadn't you told me about your father beforehand? You've kept these secrets hidden for no apparent reason."

Rose wiped at her tears. "You don't know him like I do. Why, he tore my doll to shreds when I was a small child. His horrible actions never left me."

"Now, now, it's going to turn out alright." Elizabeth squeezed her hand. "Perhaps I should send my husband to Dallas to speak with your father."

No! Please, do not attempt to fix anything. I assure you he will hire men to follow your husband, placing him in terrible danger." Rose began to feel it was a mistake to come here. She didn't need anyone else involved.

"Oh, Rose, don't look so scared. He can't possibly be so bad. You were a child when he did that to your doll. People change."

She shuddered. "You don't understand, Elizabeth. He recently threatened to take my horse and have her chopped up right before I left as a mail order bride. He hasn't changed one bit."

Elizabeth's hand went to her throat. "Oh, dear! We can't let him know you are here, then."

"That's my problem, if only I could have the courage like you do to confront him."

Elizabeth took both her hands. "No one can tell you what to do or how to accomplish anything. I did what was right for my life, what I thought was best. If you are here for advice, I can't give you any. Look

inside your heart and the answers will all come in time, my dear Rose."

She was right. Rose wanted Elizabeth to tell her what to do with her father but it wasn't in her place to do so. Rose had to dig deep down and find the courage inside of herself first. It would not be a good idea to confront him yet. She was still too afraid.

"You are right, I understand. Now, if I only knew what was going on in the mind of the man I love."

Elizabeth laughed. "I do have some experience with that," she joked, making Rose smile.

"He told one of my renters that he has no interest in courting me. Sandy Logan asked him if he could court me and JT said yes."

"JT?"

"Yes, for James Thomas."

"So you are no longer on formal names?"

Rose shook her head. "In public I call him Reverend Pope but when no one is in sight, he is JT to me."

"Where does Mr. Sandy Logan come in?" Elizabeth leaned forward. "I must say, what a strange name?"

Rose sighed. "He is a renter, hired to do some labor for the town by Sheriff Nightingale. He seems to want to court me."

"Ah, I see. Why would Reverend Pope allow this to go on if he has already claimed to want to marry you? I recall that very clearly."

"He had wanted to marry me at one time but when I realized my father would end the marriage and hurt everyone involved, including anyone who got in his way, I didn't want to risk it. I thought it better to be friends."

"Oh, and how does the good reverend feel about this friendship?"

Rose shuffled her feet. "He agreed, although reluctantly. He made me so mad, telling Sandy Logan I was available to court. How dare he say these words when I know deep in my heart he wants more than friendship! I feel it every time he gets too close. Do you know what he did?" Rose pushed a strand of fly-a-way hair back.

Elizabeth seemed amused. "What did he do?"

"Right before he left he kissed me like I was the last breath he'd

ever take, that's what he did!"

Elizabeth burst out in laughter.

Rose was vulnerable enough without her friend making light of her situation. "It isn't one bit funny!"

Elizabeth gave her a hug. "I'm not laughing at you, my dear friend. I'm amused at the two of you. It's obvious there is love between you and the reverend. Why deny what is bound to be your fate?"

"He left town."

"Why in the world would he do such a thing? What about the church?"

She shrugged. "JT says he'll be back to open it. I found out he was stalling the material delivery. It's in Wichita Falls, waiting to be delivered, so I paid for it myself. I thought it would be a nice surprise since it is obvious JT can't cover the cost. So when he gets back, the church will be ready and waiting for him."

"Then it seems those problems are solved. When he returns, tell him how you feel."

Rose shook her head. "Sandy went to him to see how much interest JT had in pursuing me. The sad truth is he told Sandy to try to court me. The man I love with all my heart has given another man permission to court me. What does this say? He never loved me, even though he kisses me as if it were his last breath."

The tears began to flow again. Elizabeth let her cry it out, quietly getting up to heat more water for tea. After refilling their cups, she began to speak. "Rose, my friend, you are wrong. As I listen to this story, one thing occurs to me. Just as you have something to hide, so does he."

"What do you mean?"

Elizabeth smiled. "It appears that you love the reverend and from the actions that I've seen, he loves you as well. You are afraid of your father's wrath if you marry him so you tell him to be your friend only. He loves you but says another man can court you. He kisses you like there is no tomorrow. Then he leaves but plans to return. Think about it. He has gone somewhere to do something and upon his return will reveal it all."

Rose sniffed again. “Elizabeth, it sounds so dramatic the way you spelled it out. If he loved me, he never would let me court another man.”

“Maybe so, unless he is sacrificing himself for a noble cause.”

Rose thought the same thing. Except she wasn’t going to fall for any more lies. “The time of deception is over. When he returns, I plan to tell him who I really am. The more I sit here talking about this whole situation, I realize I will never be free until I confront my father. I won’t allow anyone to court me until then.”

A sadness came over Rose. All the things she loved the most were right here in Mill Ridge. She wasn’t strong enough to confront her father. Yet, if she didn’t, her life would always be on hold. No man would be good enough.

But she owed it to JT to tell him the truth. “I’m clear headed now. Thank you, Elizabeth. Even though I’m not sure what to do, I feel a whole lot better, as if I can face what lies ahead.”

As they walked outside, Elizabeth faced her. “You have some harsh decisions to make, Rose. I’m sure you will make the right choices. Don’t give up on love, no matter the cost.”

As she said the last words, her husband rode up, sliding from his horse to take his wife in his arms. Rose watched as the two shared a brief kiss, unaware of anyone else.

Rose looked up to see a man trying to dismount. It almost made her cry out to see him struggle so. He was a tall man, she didn’t understand why he didn’t slide from his mount like Noah had. When he turned to find her watching him, Rose realized it was the man who had been shot in the leg during the fiasco with the outlaws awhile back. “Good afternoon,” she directed to him.

“Good afternoon,” he grumbled, leaning on the horse for support. He pulled a cane from the back of his saddle and began to walk with the cane in one hand while holding the reins in the other.

“How does he manage?” Rose asked when the man was far enough away.

“He has a hard time,” Noah admitted. “I talked him into staying here until his leg heals. Stubborn as an old goat, he is. Grant bought

some land adjacent to mine awhile back and won't listen to me one bit. Every chance he gets he's over on his land working like the dickens. His wound should be long healed by now, but he won't rest. If he keeps this up he'll be a cripple the rest of his life. Doc told him so."

Elizabeth chimed in. "He laughed in the doctor's face. Said he'll rest when he's six foot under. I'm afraid if he doesn't come to his senses, the doctor will be right."

Rose smiled. "Maybe we need to fix him up with a mail order bride, someone who won't take no nonsense."

Elizabeth raised her brows. "Oh, that's a wonderful idea."

"Now, you two ladies, don't go getting no ideas for Grant. He's too stubborn. No woman would put up with him."

"Pa! Your home!" Little Katie burst through the door, running across the porch and yard to throw herself in Noah's arms. Grant was forgotten as she watched Noah hold Katie as if she were the world to him. As Elizabeth approached the two, his arm slung over her shoulder, embracing them all in a hug.

Rose envied the life Elizabeth had. She wanted the same. As she drove off in her buggy, she daydreamed about the man who stole her heart. If only she had the gumption to face her fears, perhaps she would make a reverend's wife after all.

The thought of going back to Dallas to her father's ranch to stand up to him horrified her. She didn't know which way to turn. On one hand if she did confront him and put the past behind her, would JT still want her as his wife after she had lied to him and everyone in the town?

Or, does she continue to spew lies about who she is and where she is from, hoping against hope that she is never discovered? Her heart knew she would be found out one way or another.

It was time to grow up. As Rose entered her sweet home town, she looked around, nodding to neighbors who waved and called her by name.

She was in an impossible situation and she already missed JT like crazy. He had promised to come back to finish the church. At least she

would see him again. Until then, she had a lot to think about.

Chapter 7

"Time in its aging course teaches all things." -Aeschylus

Saturday night's social was here before she realized. Rose dreaded the thought of dancing with anyone other than JT but he wasn't here to do so. Even if he were, he had made it perfectly clear he wanted nothing more to do with her. Hadn't he? Yet, if their last kiss was any indication, then she knew it wasn't over by a long shot with JT. When he returned, they were going to have a serious discussion once and for all. How could a man want her so much, kiss her like that and then tell her to be with someone else? It did not make sense and she was going to find out the truth. There was something not quite right.

When Sandy Logan asked her to dance, she did so reluctantly. He was a perfect gentleman, respecting her decision she had made a week ago about being courted.

Except it was now one week later. Rose knew the subject would come up this evening. She wasn't ready to move on, not yet. Maybe not ever. It was time she was honest with herself and everyone around her. Rose mentally prepared herself Sandy's question. When it didn't come, she was surprised and decided to relax and enjoy the festivities for the evening.

The two twirled around the dance floor, which was a make-shift one out in the field by the church where the desert social took place awhile back. There were chairs lining the one side and tables along the other filled with so much food no one would leave hungry. If they did, it was their own fault. Rose had spent days baking her lemon drop cookies and tons of bread for tonight. She even threw in a chocolate cake which brought back memories of JT enjoying it the last

time they were here.

She wondered why he was in Dallas. It didn't make sense. He said it was some type of business he had to attend to. At first, she thought it was about the materials for the church, but that was already taken care of since she had paid for them herself. They had been delivered yesterday. With the town no longer needing to worry how to get the much needed supplies, a few of the other townsfolk volunteered to help the paid worker finish the job.

It meant when JT returned, his church would be ready to start his life as the official reverend of Mill Ridge, even though he was unofficially being a reverend for awhile now.

Before he began, she was determined to find out where they stood with each other. If in fact he cared, then it was her duty to tell him the truth. It was time to take her identity back.

"This is fun," Sandy mentioned, a deep smile showing a set of nice teeth. He was a handsome man, except for the fact Rose had no interest in him. Hopefully someone else would.

There was only one man she wanted.

"I'm glad you are having a fun time," she told him, smiling even though she wanted to cry. She missed JT so much. Especially during times like these.

"Would you care to take a walk?" he asked, stopping to stare at her.

Here it comes, Rose thought to herself. He wants to know if I will court him. She looked around, searching for a way out of the inevitable.

Yet, if she were bound to grow up and face her fears, then it was time to start now. "Yes, let's walk. I've noticed there are two other couples walking over there." Rose pointed to the others who were starting down the street.

As the two followed, Sandy stopped and turned. "I know you have no intention of allowing me to court you, Miss Rose. To be honest, it isn't the main reason I am here."

Rose was confused. "What do you mean?"

Sandy took off his hat, holding it against his chest. "I am not who you think I am. I'm sorry to have deceived you. My name is truly

Sandy Logan and I am a Pinkerton hired by your father to find you."

Dread drained Rose of all color. "Father," she whispered, barely able to get the word out. Her throat constricted and the night air, even though cool, began to heat up her normally pale cheeks. Rose felt as if a hand took a hold and began to strange her throat. She swayed back and forth.

Sandy gently grabbed her elbow. "Ma'am? I am not here to harm you. Please, maybe you should sit down."

Rose chewed at her bottom lip. Anger began to seep through her veins as she realized her father had found her. It had taken him awhile. Why had she thought he wouldn't?

Now the decision had been made for her. She would have to leave here, leave the friends she recently made behind and the people she loved. If she didn't, this precious town would be ruined. The inhabitants would know her father's wrath.

Rose stood tall. She looked around, turning back to see the crowd laughing and dancing in the field. Who was she kidding? Even though they made her feel a part of something wonderful, the first chance they realized she had lied to them, she would be shunned.

Rose didn't want to carry the burden of being rejected by these wonderful people. She sighed, defeat reaching out to her like the flame of a burning candle on a windy night. "How did he find me?"

She knew by the look on his face he was indeed relieved she wasn't going to run away. Sandy shrugged. "It was fairly simple. Your withdrawal of monies from the bank in Dallas was easy to trace. Once we realized where you were, your father thought it was a wise idea for me to come first to see how you are faring."

Rose looked at him in disbelief. "My father never cared how I was doing! All he wants is for me to return to the ranch to marry someone I don't even know!"

Sandy cocked his head. "That a fact?"

She nodded. "It is a fact. I'm sure he told you one thing, but you do not know the whole story. I refused to marry the man he had chosen for me. I am of age to decide for myself. I'm afraid your trip here is futile."

Sandy reached inside his jacket, retrieving a letter from the pocket. “He told me you would argue. I am to give this to you. It is from your father.”

Her hand reached out to take the envelope even though she didn’t want to read what was inside. Why now? When she had decisions to make about her and JT? Staring at the envelope, she was afraid to open it up. “I am not sure that I want to read this.”

“It’s not as bad as you have chosen to believe. Let me walk you home so you can have the privacy to read your letter.”

They walked in silence until he dropped her off at the boarding house. “I’ll be going back to the festivities for now. You know where I am if you need anything.”

“You don’t know my father,” she repeated, knowing her words fell on deaf ears. Sandy was already down the street, returning to the dance and standing by the food table. She was almost sure he fled so he didn’t have to hear the murderous tone of her voice once she read the letter.

Removing the seal, Rose tore at the envelope, unfolding the paper inside. *My dear daughter Rose, How we have missed you. Please don’t be upset with your mother or I as we have come to realize in the last few months that our hearts are broken without you here.*

Daughter, I made a huge mistake. Probably most of my life was a mistake. I’ve taken advantage of everyone and everything. I am truly sorry for my miscreant ways. I’ve hurt you terribly. I wronged you several times. I’m not sure if you’ve ever forgotten how I had tore your favorite doll to shreds or threatened your favorite horse. Because of my anger and self-righteousness, I’ve hurt one of the people most dear to me, scaring you off to God knows where.

I’ve had a reckoning. There was a bad accident and I am now a cripple, unable to take care of my family. Because of this accident, my left side is stiff. The doctors here call what happened to me a stroke. All I know is I will never be the same person you remember. I do believe the good Lord has given me a chance to make things right and I aim to do so.

Please, daughter, I need to see you again. Your mother and I miss you so. We won’t force a marriage upon you. Ever. I promise with all my heart

and since it is in writing you have my word of honor, something I'm not known for but would like to be.

I am a changed man. Our neighbor lost his life, while I was just hurt. His sons now run his ranch. I'm no longer aiming to be the biggest and wealthiest, my life now is filled with the love of my abiding wife and those who stuck by me when I was down and out. I don't care to ever go back to being that person I was.

Please, Rose, I want to see you again. I'm so sorry I made you leave here. If I don't hear from you soon, I'm bringing your mother and coming to see you. I've known for awhile now where you are. Don't run away. I promise I will behave and not upset you.

Yours Truly,

Your Father

Rose sat in stunned silence. Her shoulders began to shake as tears slid down her face. She covered her cheeks with her hands, not wanting anyone passing by to see her grief.

Dare she believe her father was a changed man? He had never, ever spoke words like these before. Or was this a hoax? A stunt to force her to come back? If only JT were here to help her figure things out. Except he went to Dallas for a mysterious reason.

She was alone. Whatever decision she made was hers alone to bear. Rose closed her eyes, not wanting to face anything.

If she ever went back home, it would be to visit, not to live. She found a new home here in Mill Ridge. Would she be able to make her father understand she no longer wanted to be a part of the ranch? Yet, if he were a cripple, he may need her help. Confusion whirled around her.

A set of footsteps drew near. Sandy Logan was back. He stood on the porch. "Are you alright, Miss Rose?" Concern filled his eyes. He was a nice man. It wasn't his fault this had happened.

"I'll be fine. He says he is making a trip to see me."

Sandy nodded. "I know, it is why I gave you the letter so soon. There is a train coming to Wichita Falls in two days time. He plans to be on it."

"I only hope he doesn't try to ruin things for me here. I'm not sure I

can trust him ever again."

"Your father has known for awhile where you were. He hasn't caused you or anyone else any harm now, has he?"

Rose had to agree. Deep in her heart she knew he had changed. It was the way he wrote the letter, it resonated with her soul. She stood, dusting off her skirts. "It's time I faced the good people of Mill Ridge. They should know who I am."

"Are you certain you want to burden this town with your status? No offence, but the less people know, sometimes it makes for better friendships."

Rose headed back to the dance. "No, sir. This is my home now. I have to be honest and if they decide to shun me, then I'll know I was never truly accepted here in the first place."

"Very well," he said, taking steps to catch up.

When Rose got to the dance, people were smiling and laughing and she almost hated to ruin anyone's evening with her confession. Even so, she marched up to the musicians and waited until the song was finished.

When everyone stopped dancing, she spoke up. "If I may have your attention, I'd like to talk to everyone here. Please, come closer so you can hear me."

As Rose waited until every single person surrounded her, a fear of the unknown almost took complete control of her. With a slight shake of her hand, she closed her eyes and pictured JT was there to give her comfort and confidence. Taking a deep breath, she smiled at the others waiting.

"I never told any of you the truth about me. I am the daughter of a wealthy rancher. We have a large ranch on the outskirts of Dallas. I ran away from home because my father tried to force me to marry the neighbor's son, who I didn't even know and to this day I still have no clue who he is. I am ashamed that I kept this from you even if it was in fear that my father would find me and the town would be at his mercy. He is a very powerful man.

At one time my father was also a dangerous man. I thought if he knew I was here he would cause one or many of you harm. The man I

knew made horrible threats to me over the years, and I didn't want anyone else to get hurt. So, I tried to hide here and lied about who I am. I ask all of you to forgive me for placing this town in the center of danger."

Everyone was silent. Not a soul dared to breath. Rose looked from person to person, eyes ablaze as she tried to determine if they were angry.

The owner of the mercantile flung his head back and hooted. "Well, girly, no need to worry. We all have secrets in the broom closet. What cha telling your skeletons for?"

The rest of the folks nodded and spoke to each other. An older lady Rose wasn't too familiar with shuffled her feet as she came up and gave her a hug. "Now don't you worry honey, we are one big family here. It's nice to be honest but I'm not telling a soul why I come here to Mill Ridge. You wouldn't believe it anyway."

One of the men turned, covered his mouth with both hands and hollered to the little lady. "She has a jaded past, hardy har har! Why don't you tell her, Mama."

"You hush up, sonny boy. That's my son, he is always joking around even if its the honest to goodness truth."

Rose was shocked but in a good way. Looking out at the crowd of folks, it occurred to her out of the blue that almost every person there was starting over for one reason or another. "You mean I worried myself plumb to death for nothing?"

"It appears so. I wouldn't worry no more. When that fine reverend comes back, we are all rooting for a wedding. Why, you'd make a fine preacher's wife."

"Here, here."

"Agree!"

Another voice from the crowd shouted out. "Let's hope there is a wedding soon. We need some more of that cake!"

Rose laughed so much she wanted to give each and every person a big hug. The welcome she received was like coming home. Her father would never be able to break the bonds she had with this town. Not even with any threats or violence. A relief so strong commenced to

cover her and surround her with this town's love of freedom and individuality.

The people of Mill Ridge were here for a reason. A new start. When JT came back she was going to march right up to him and confront him once and for all.

There was no more threat of her father harming anyone ever again.

"May I escort you back to your home when this is over?" Sandy Logan asked.

"Of course, you may. I must say, Mr. Logan, I was not thrilled to be in your presence at first but you have proven me wrong. I misjudged you. I guess it was because I am in love with JT. I didn't want you calling on me."

Sandy held out his arm. When she took a hold of his elbow, they strolled down the street towards the boarding house. "You are no longer denying what everyone in this town has known for awhile now?"

Rose smiled. "I guess I am. Now if JT agrees, which I have a feeling he is up to something wonderful, there may be some cake before you leave here."

"Cake sounds wonderful. Your parents will be here in two days time. I'll stick around until then."

"I'm sure he'll want to pay you for your services even though they are no longer needed."

Sandy grinned. "I'm not finished until I see you and your father together. I promised him that I would present you to him. A Pinkerton always keeps his word."

"Well, then, sir, we can't break tradition."

Chapter 8

"Let your life lightly dance on the edges of time like dew on the tip of a leaf." -Rabindranath Tagore

For two days Rose was at her wits end trying to get ready for her parents visit. Even though she felt in her heart her parents letter was above board and honest, there was still the little girl fear in the back of her head.

She kept one room open for them and rented out JT's room to a new resident. Miss Addie sent over two new girls for Rose to train so it kept her busy day and night showing the new girls what to do, even though they had some experience living at Miss Addie's boarding house. There wasn't much time to think about JT even if she did miss him terribly.

Miss Addie felt every single girl needed to learn how to run the boarding house so she would be ready to handle a household when it came time to go off as a mail order bride.

Annabelle was the most helpful. She jumped right in, cooking, cleaning and taking care of the residents as if she owned the place. Rose was happy to allow her to take over while she made plans to spend time with her parents and take them to meet Elizabeth while they were here. She felt that in no time Annabelle would be confident enough to take over the boarding house, especially if she were to become the new reverend's wife.

The church was done. Every single person in town helped to finish the church and its parish so it would be ready when not only her parents came to visit but when JT came back.

The others wanted JT to get started with church services right away. People were talking about being baptised and finding several

townsfolk to teach classes for the children to learn about Jesus. It was a grand idea. Rose was happy to be a part of this town where they worked together to make things happen instead of having one person call all the shots.

Caroline was the quiet one. She followed Annabelle around like a lost puppy. Something awful must have happened to her, Rose surmised. She wouldn't force her to do any more right now but would try to give her time to feel as if she belonged. After awhile, the girl would become more comfortable and she would blossom on her own. Rose knew first-hand how it felt to be lonely. It took a whole town to convince her to be herself.

She made plans to give them both some space to see how they would do without her watching their every move. Rose picked up a bouquet of flowers she purchased at the mercantile yesterday. "I'll be back, I want to take these to the parish in case Reverend Pope returns. It will be a nice welcome home."

Rose was so happy when she saw the completion of the church. She walked to the rear of the building, where a small building was attached. It was an adorable small home for the reverend to live while he worked at the church. Plans to plant a small garden began to form in Rose's head as she walked through the door, which was not locked. It was rare these days to lock any door in Mill Ridge.

The possibilities were endless. As JT's wife, she imagined the kind of curtains she would make to complete the home, making it warm and cozy inside. JT would be so happy to step inside the door each and every day.

Rose stood in the middle of the room, shaking her head, realizing she had been daydreaming. She had to stop this silliness, JT hadn't even asked her to marry him yet.

Placing the flowers in the center of the small table, she stood back, admiring her display of colors. If he didn't come back before the end of the week, she'd have to return and bring fresh ones. She wanted it to look nice when he entered the room.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" When Rose turned she found a tall older man with wire-framed spectacles standing in the doorway. He carried an

old faded carpetbag in one hand. Pushing the glasses up his nose, he smiled at her. His face was kind so she didn't worry about being alone in the parish with him.

"Hello," she told him. "I'm Rose, proprietor of the only boarding house in Mill Ridge. I was dropping off some fresh flowers for the good reverend. And you are?" she questioned, wondering who this new face was.

"A pleasure to meet you. I am Reverend Goodson. I was a bit delayed because of my sister's health, God rest her soul." He made the sign of the cross over his chest.

"What do you mean delayed?" she asked, wondering why he was here now. Where was JT?

"I was hired by Miss Addie a few months ago. I had planned to come here early and help with the reconstruction of the church but was delayed when my sister became ill. I'm happy and grateful that the structure is finished. I'm ready to begin my service to this community."

Rose was in shock. "Where is Reverend Pope?"

The older man pushed his glasses up, even though they were as close to his head as ever. "Who?"

"Reverend Pope? He is our man of God here. Why, he was living in the boarding house up until a week ago until he left to take care of some business in Dallas. He is sure to return any day now."

Reverend Goodson's brows rose. He seemed startled to hear her words. "I believe you may have been duped, Miss. I've been on my way here since last month. There was no one else to be hired for this position. I've been paid a month in advance only to be delayed by my sister's illness, as I've told you and informed Miss Addie and the Sheriff, who hired me."

Rose hurried by him so fast she was afraid the man would spin around in a circle. "Then the whole town has been duped!' She ran towards the boarding house. If JT wasn't the reverend since day one, who exactly was he?

Fuming, she realized she wasn't the only one telling lies. She needed to take a trip to Wichita Falls to speak with Miss Addie and get

to the bottom of things.

She could easily get the buggy ready to go. Instead, she made arrangements for Annabelle to take over while she saddled up Molly, the sweet Appaloosa she had ridden with JT awhile back. Securing the reins, she threw her leg over the horse and began the hour long ride to find out the truth, only slowing down to let the horse rest on occasion. Rose was about to get to the bottom of this one way or another.

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JT approached the family with care. They seemed jumpy at first as he stood on the front porch of this small cabin in the middle of nowhere. Before he knocked on the wooden door, a small thin man came out, a rifle by his side. It wasn't aimed at him but JT had no doubt he would shoot if need be. The man seemed determined to protect his family and JT didn't blame him. They were far from town.

"Who sent you here?"

"I'm on my own."

"That a fact?" The man stared, eyes wide and fearful. Something spooked the man, anyone could see.

"Yes, sir," JT told him, taking his hat off slowly as a sign of respect when his wife appeared in the doorway.

"Nelle, get inside. We don't know this man."

"Nonsense, Carter. He don't mean no harm."

His wife was smart and very observant. He wasn't here to harm them. "I'm not here to cause harm. I promise."

"How'd you find us. Not too many folks know we are here?"

JT wondered if he was running from something. By the look of surprise and fear in the man's eyes, he might have the law after him.

"I'm actually here about a horse."

"A horse? Why? We don't have a horse for sale." The man raised his rifle, his hand shaking.

JT lifted a hand. "No need to ready that firearm. I've come to inquire about a horse a young woman sold you awhile back."

"What about it? It's ours fair and square. We paid for the horse."

He wondered how this was going to end. The man was as nervous as a devil caught in the collection plate at church. “I know you did. Here’s the issue. The young lady sold her horse to keep it safe from her father, who wanted to harm the poor thing. She didn’t want to get rid of it. Misty is a good horse as I’m sure you know. I have a proposition for you. I’ve brought another horse with me. I’ll trade you my horse I’m riding for her and give you the extra horse.”

The man glared, unsure. “Two horses for one?”

“Yes, sir. I even filled the saddle bags with some provisions for your family. Some flour, sugar, wheat and other things you may need here on this homestead. I really want her to have her horse back.”

The man shuffled his wife through the door and ducked inside, leaving JT on the porch. He heard the two talking in low tones, then the lady began to raise her voice. He wasn’t able to make clear on what was being said. After a few minutes, they both came back out. The man held out his hand. “You have a deal so long as you promise never to come back here again. As a matter of fact just forget you ever saw us if anyone asks.”

JT grinned. “Deal.” After weeks of searching, he was going to take Misty home where she belonged.

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JT rode Misty through Wichita Falls, dropping her off at the livery. He threw some extra money at the fellow there to take good care of her. Next, he was going to get a room at the hotel, have one of those fancy showers they bragged about before heading back to Mill Ridge to give Rose her gift. He needed to rest for a few hours, he’d been on the trail for over two weeks. Tomorrow, he’d surprise Rose early in the morning, after all her guests were fed breakfast and she had time to be with Misty.

His grin caused several ladies to stop and stare as he walked by. JT ignored the ladies, he was thinking about one woman, Rose. She’d be so surprised to see Misty. Perhaps it would make up for what he was going to do. It was time to be honest with her even though he knew

the result would be to lose her. He had plenty of time to speculate and think things through while on the dusty trail.

JT loved Rose. But, he didn't have the heart any longer to deceive her. It was time to be honest with her and the whole town, to tell them he was no reverend. He sure hoped the new reverend would soon be on his way to take over. Once JT let the cat out of the bag, he was sure they would ask or maybe kick him out of town.

The thing was he knew how much she hated her father and anything and anyone that resembled that part of her past. When she realizes he is the man she was being forced to marry, he didn't even want to think of the consequences right now. All he wanted was to see her surprise when he presented her with Misty. For a few brief moments she would be euphoric, until realizing the only way to know about Misty was to know where she came from.

That's when he had to tell her the truth. It was all coming to a big standstill. JT would go home to his ranch without the woman he loved. He'd probably never love anyone like he did Rose.

A sadness drifted over his whole presence as he stood in the private shower of the hotel. JT pulled the spigot, turning it to let the hot water run over his face and hair, washing the grub and dirt from his face and body. Except it didn't cleanse his soul or the ache when he thought about losing Rose.

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Rose pounded on the door of Miss Addie's boarding house, not realizing she was drawing quite a bit of attention. Across the street, several men turned back to see what the noise was before heading in to the saloon. Rose drew herself up, embarrassed she was causing a ruckus and yet determined to get to the bottom of things. Something inside told her Miss Addie knew more about this whole situation. Especially when Reverend Goodson said he had already been paid a month's wages.

The door swung open as Miss Addie moved aside to let her in. "Good morning, Rose. What brings you here so early?"

Rose made her way inside as if she were on a mission. Which she was. “Do you have a place where we may speak?”

“Why, of course, I’m about to have some tea. Sit down.” Rose made her way to the table, taking a seat across from her hostess. While Miss Addie poured her a fresh cup, she watched the older woman carefully. There was something in the air, a kind of nervous energy. She wasn’t the least bit surprised Rose showed up at her door.

It occurred to her in that moment Miss Addie may be behind this whole affair.

“Now then, would you care to tell me why the early visit?”

Rose got straight to the point. “Why did you have JT pretend to be a reverend when we both know darn well Reverend Goodson was on his way here after he buried his sister?”

Miss Addied placed the cup carefully on the plate underneath. “Oh, dear. The cat is truly out of the bag. I told him to tell the truth from the start.”

“You told who?”

Miss Addie sighed. “I don’t believe it’s me you should be talking to. Yes, I knew he was not the man of God as I hired Mr. Goodson to run the church in Mill Ridge. I also knew of his delay. When your JT, as you call him, presented his dilemma, he asked if he could portray himself as the reverend for good reason. I warned him it would be a big mistake not to tell you the truth from the beginning.”

A whistle from the incoming train rent through the air. Rose watched as folks scampered past the window, the pace of the town speeding up to get to the train depot.

Rose was so confused. Why would JT want to pretend to be a man of God? What purpose did he have? “I don’t understand, Miss Addie. Why did he fool us all?”

“I don’t believe he wanted to fool anyone. It was the only way he was able to show you that he was not an awful person.”

Rose’s eyes widened. “Me! I didn’t know him before we met at the boarding house! Do you mean to say he pretended to be a reverend to find me? Why, that is so calculating, it sounds like something my father would do.”

“I’m sure it can all be sorted out,” Miss Addie mentioned.

Rose stood up in one quick movement. “Oh, my lands!” Her hand went to her throat.

Miss Addie stood as well. “Now, Rose, before you go off on a tangent, please calm down.”

Fury, thick and rampant went through Rose like a tornado sweeping across the Texas prairie. “Soft spoken, clean shaven James Thomas is none other than the man I was being forced to marry!” She stumbled back before grabbing the back of the chair. How did she not know this?

Rose let Miss Addie help her back in to the seat. What she wanted to do was find the man and slap his face for pretending to care so deeply for her.

He was following her father’s instructions to bring her back one way or another. Oh, she knew how her father operated. “He was directing this whole thing after all. My father hasn’t changed one bit. I am such a fool.”

“No, Rose, you are not a fool. You need to speak to JT, he truly loves you. He always has but I’m not going to try to defend him. If you want to get it all out in the open, go speak to him yourself. Right there he is.”

Rose turned her head to look out the front parlor window. JT was strolling across the street, heading this way, all dapper in a clean suit, his hair still wet and slicked back as if he had just bathed.

She went to the door, determined to have it out with him dead center in the middle of the street. He would never, ever fool her again.

“Rose, stay calm, there is a good explanation for all of this.” Miss Addie took her hand, squeezing it gently.

“I should be upset with you, Miss Addie, but I know you always have everyone’s best interest at heart. Thank you for being honest now. I wasn’t the most honest person myself.”

“Then remember that when you speak to JT.”

“I’ll try.”

When JT saw her he stumbled for a second. Then, a big smile covered his face. “Rose, it’s so good to see you.”

"Humph!"

When he saw the look on her face, he sobered. "What is it, Rose? What's wrong?"

"I didn't expect to see you here so soon. You've been gone quite a while," Rose told him, trying hard to stay calm. She was trying not to be angry but her cheeks reddened the more she thought about his deceit. She wanted to confront him right here in the middle of the street. Except she didn't have time to say anything else because she heard her mother's voice call out.

"Rose, darling! Rose!"

She had almost forgotten they were coming in on this morning's train. Well, at least they were all together so she could tell them exactly what she thought all at the same time!

Her mother always hid in the wings even though she knew everything that went on but kept quiet because she didn't like to stir things up. Her mother didn't look the worse for wear, her gown neat and clean, unlike some of the other ladies who got off the train with dust all over them. For some reason, dust and her mother didn't quite get along. Rose almost grinned.

Her father, a mean, tough man who was now reduced to using a walking stick as his one leg drug behind him. No longer tall and overpowering, Rose almost ran to him to help as he worked his way towards them. His face showed no emotion as he tried to hold up his head while others watched his struggles.

She heard JT draw in a harsh breath, realizing who was walking towards them. She wondered if he was about to chicken out, run and hide like a coward.

Instead, JT drew up his shoulders and turned to face the couple making their way towards them. "Mr. O'Brien, Mrs. O'Brien," he said quietly.

Her father stopped in his tracks, staring at the two. He directed himself to JT. "You've been here all along and didn't tell us? I've had to hire a Pinkerton to find her." His words were still harsh as ever, his accusing tone causing the strongest men to quake in their boots. Not JT. Rose was quite impressed when he faced her father full on.

“Yes. I’ve been here under false pretences. I haven’t told Rose and I wish to speak to her first before you try to take her back.”

“By all means, JT, speak.” Rose flipped her hands to her hips, wondering what he could possibly say that wasn’t worse than what he had already done.

“I think we should take this inside,” JT mentioned. “There is a crowd forming.

Rose laughed. “Not a chance. If you have something to say, JT or whatever your name is, then say it to the whole town of Wichita Falls.”

Her father shook his walking stick in the air. “We don’t air our dirty laundry in front of others.”

Rose had enough. “Well, Father, we do now because I’m not going anywhere until someone tells me exactly what the two of you have done! No one will ever make me do what I don’t wish to ever again!”

“Now, Rose, we are not here to force you to go home. Although, it would be nice if you would come back with us.” Her mother’s voice was loud and clear. It was the first time she ever spoke up in front of people.

Rose stared at the townsfolk who were starting to form a crowd. These were the people from Wichita Falls who had saved her and many other women from a mean, awful man a long time ago. They would interfere again if they thought she was in danger. All she had to do was say the word. Why did she ever think she would be putting people in harms way?

Looking at her father, she realized he was no longer a threat. He was no longer placed on a pedestal where nothing would ever happen to him. This stroke he’s been afflicted with was making him appear more human. She had always thought he was untouchable.

She turned to her mother. “Were you a part of the scheme to try to force me to marry our neighbor’s son? Were you, Mama?”

The older woman gasped. “Never! I swear to you, Rose. I have not done anything wrong.”

The words just upset Rose even more. Her mother had never done anything it seemed. She had never stuck up for Rose when her father

was being his cruel self. When Rose had told her how her father tore apart her doll, her mother had scoffed and said Rose must be imagining things.

“I’m sure you don’t think you’ve done anything wrong, Mama. I’ve been afraid of father for years because of that reason.” She took a step closer. “But, no more! Whatever happens here today it is because of all of you. All three of you!”

She turned to look at JT to include him. His eyes were filled with empathy, with something she didn’t understand. She had to look away.

Her father spoke up. He shook his cane in the air. “Now, listen here, Rose. We didn’t come here to be yelled at. We came to support you and tell you how sorry we are for what we did. I’m not going to stand here while everyone in this town is listening to you rant and rave like a mad woman.”

Before she dared to speak again, a commotion started at the end of the street by the livery. Two men were desperately trying to hold a horse back while its legs were kicking out and in to everything it could.

JT swore and began to move forward.

Rose turned, distracted by the loud sounds. Her eyes widened when the horse broke free. Her hands went to her cheeks. She cried out.

Everyone froze. The horse galloped down the street, it’s mane flying behind gloriously. Rose began to laugh. She stepped towards the golden colored animal, her steps lighter as she began to run to meet Misty. Tears of joy ran down her cheeks. Misty stopped short of running her over, sensing her owner. Rose took a hold of the mane, wrapping her arms around the thick neck.

“Oh, my! I can’t believe it, how did you get here?”

She heard JT’s voice behind her. “I traded her for two horses.”

Rose closed her eyes. “Does this mean she no longer belongs to the family I sold her to?”

“She is yours, Rose.”

Rose spoke soft words to Misty, while its ear twitched as if she understood. She stilled, listening. Rose grabbed a pile of her hair and

pulled herself on her bare back. She didn't need a saddle, the two of them were like one. Nudging her in the lower belly, horse and rider turned away from the crowd.

"Rose, we need to talk."

She had missed him so much. He stood there with his arms hanging by his side, looking a bit defeated knowing she would leave. He had a lot of explaining to do and she wasn't about to let him off the hook. But not right now. Everything else would wait until she reacquainted herself with Misty.

She looked over at her parents, who were also staring at her as if she were mad. "Right now, I'm taking Misty home. I'm sure you can help my parents find their way to Mill Ridge, JT. Since you were all in cahoots together, perhaps you can all ride and commiserate with each other."

With those words, she nudged Misty. The horse moved as if she knew exactly where to go. The two galloped down the street, right out of town like there were a pack of bandits behind them. Rose leaned in, enjoying the free-spirited animal as they high-tailed it out of Wichita Falls, leaving the others behind to stare at their dust.

Chapter 9

"Everything that happens to us leaves some trace behind; everything contributes imperceptibly to make us what we are."

- Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

"I love my parents, even though my father had been so cruel. I now see him as a normal person, even though he has a limp."

"A limp should not define a man." The deep voice spoke up from the doorway. Elizabeth's neighbor and Noah's best friend was coming in from working the ranch. He nodded to the two from where they sat at the table, having a cup of tea.

"Now, Grant, don't be so defensive. Rose was merely explaining how her father had a stroke. He has no feeling on his one side and has a slight limp."

"I heard everything that was said. People notice a limp all right. They stare and think you are less of a man." Grant turned to Rose. "If your father has softened it isn't because he has a limp. He probably realizes he had been acting like a jackass all his life and wants to make up for things now."

Elizabeth tried hard not to giggle, but failed. "Grant, we do not speak that way."

Rose grinned. She was used to rough characters. Lord knew she had plenty come through the doors of the boarding house. This was the west after all, not some prim and proper home in the city. The atmosphere was always charged. Especially with a retired Texas ranger in close proximity.

"Rose, you may stay here as long as necessary but I do believe it's time to get on with your life. The people that have hurt you are sorry and want to make it up to you. JT is in love with you. Look at what he

did?"

Rose knew Elizabeth meant how JT went about finding Misty. He had spent weeks combing the territory looking for her. A man had to love someone pretty much in order to do so. "I'm sure you are right, Elizabeth. I've spent the night here, surely I've gotten my point across." Yet, at the same time, Rose didn't want to worry him or anyone else.

Elizabeth had welcomed her yesterday afternoon and sat with her through the tears while Rose let it all out. Grant had been kind to her, taking care of Misty while she cried in her friends arms. Noah had stayed out of the way, allowing the two to spend time together.

He walked in and stood beside Grant. "Did you tell her yet?" Then Noah swooped down and gave his wife a kiss.

Elizabeth shook her head. "I didn't think it was the right time."

"Tell me what? Elizabeth? Are you? Oh, my! Yes, you are! I can see it in your face." She gave her friend a long hug, so happy for her. Rose felt bad now for burdening her with her woes.

"Doc confirmed it yesterday when he was in Mill Ridge. I do wish we had a permanent doctor here instead of only two days a week."

Rose nodded. "We need to hire someone now that you're going to have a baby. I'm so excited for you."

"I am excited, too. A bit scared if you want the truth."

"Now, honey, there's no need to be. Grant has had some medic experience as a ranger."

Rose looked at Grant, who was standing in the background, not saying much. He didn't look as if he was too crazy about the idea of delivering a baby. "I've heard others mention they are going to form a committee to get more done. A town committee we vote on. It will be helpful, if we need a permanent doctor, we can ask for and even demand one at the town meeting."

Elizabeth nodded. "That is a great idea but it won't help with this wee one. It takes time to appoint people and vote and all. I'll be fine, just a tad nervous, that's all."

Rose gave her another hug. "I'll be here for you, I promise."

"Thank you, Rose, it makes me feel better knowing you will."

“I better get back. I’ve been gone too long now. It’s time to forgive everyone and move on. I want the kind of life you have here, Elizabeth.”

“Good for you, Rose. Go on now, I’ll see you out.”

Rose had been walking backwards as she waved goodbye to everyone. Elizabeth was close by but not close enough to stop her when Rose stumbled and tripped over a small object on the floor. Her skirts went flying as she tumbled once then landed with one foot underneath her. Pain shot through her ankle.

She tried to stand but began to wobble, the pain getting worse. “Oh, dear! I think I overstepped my ankle.”

Noah swooped Rose up and carried her to the settee in the next room. Grant had limped over, studying her ankle. “It doesn’t look broken. You may be right, it appears swollen though. I’d keep off of it for a few days and it should be as good as new.”

Rose shook her head. “I am going back to the boarding house with a swollen ankle or not.”

“Don’t be so stubborn, you want to make it worse?” Grant’s voice was so gruff. If she didn’t know he was Noah’s best friend she may have lashed out at him.

“I’ve had a swollen ankle before. There have been many times I’ve fallen and bruised my foot or arm, it’s part of who I am. My mother says I’m a bit careless. That’s not going to stop me from getting back to JT.” Her words were spoken so softly and yet the determination in her voice left everyone there stunned.

Elizabeth knelt by her friend. “Are you sure? Why don’t you rest for a few hours and see how it feels?”

“Two hours, tops. Then we are going home.” Rose had enough of being away from JT. She wanted to tell him she forgave him. He had gone out of his way to find Misty. He had shown her in so many ways how much he cared.

The past was the past. God had placed so many good people in her life. This town was her home, a place where she finally felt a part of something. How dare she stay mad at the people who loved her more than life itself? She was going home.

Two hours later, Grant grumbled from behind her. He had reluctantly volunteered to make sure she got home safe after Elizabeth practically forced him to ride along. Rose smiled to herself as she recalled how her best friend made Grant feel guilty when he first told her no, he wasn't going to escort Rose.

"I've got too much to do on the farm," he had told her.

"Please, Grant. Rose is my best friend. She can't get on or off the horse and needs someone to escort her back to Mill Ridge. It won't take long. I mean, I can do so but Noah likes when I rest in the afternoon. You know, the baby and all."

Grant had mumbled to himself the whole time he got the two horses ready for the journey. He had helped Rose get up on Misty but ever since, he sulked in the background, not saying anything at all.

Rose didn't mind. Her thoughts were on JT. Eager to get home, she rode easy except for the few areas where the land was perfectly flat. Then she'd get Misty to trot but the pain in her ankle became too great. It took her longer than she had realized so the sun was starting to fade in the skies when they did finally get to the boarding house.

Grant immediately got down and helped assist her off Misty. He then picked her up and kicked open the door of the boarding house. There he stood in the doorway, like an giant with Rose in his arms, taking up all the space.

"What in tar-nation!" Rose heard her mother shout.

"Put her down," her father's voice threatened.

Annabelle was the only one with any sensibilities. "Rose, are you hurt? Please, sir, place her here on the settee."

Grant dumped her or placed her but it felt more like he dumped her on the settee while Annabelle gave him a what for. Then she took Grant by the arm and walked him to the kitchen where she insisted he sit down for a cup of tea.

All Rose remembered was Grant's loud guffaw when he said there's no way he's drinking that nasty stuff.

The trip had exhausted Rose. Perhaps Elizabeth had been right and she made a mistake leaving so soon. Her eyelids started to droop. She noticed her mother's face in front of her speaking but Rose didn't hear

any words. There was a giant blur right before someone lifted her in the air.

The arms that held her were nice. Familiar. She curled into a hard chest. JT. She knew without opening her eyes it was him. She thought she smiled.

The last thing she remembered was being placed on her bed.

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"How are you feeling this morning?" Annabelle's soft words startled Rose. She was sitting at the table enjoying a cup of coffee while the others had gone about their business for the day.

"I'm much better, thank you. Annabelle, I want you to know I appreciate how you took over the boarding house and kept it running while I was down and out."

Annabelle turned from the dishes she was cleaning up. "You are welcome, Rose. I do well under pressure."

"I can see you do. How many days now have I been down and out?"

"Only three."

"Oh, dear. That's one too many. Are my parents still here?"

"They are at the train depot ready to leave. Your mother insisted you were to rest. She said to tell you they will be back for the wedding."

"Wedding!"

"Yours. Don't you remember when JT carried you to your room he told you the two of you would never be apart again and he was going to marry you."

Rose dropped her head. She hadn't recalled that conversation. "I'm almost sure I would remember if he said those words to me."

"He did. We all heard. Er, well, all except you it seems." Annabelle was grinning.

"I must find JT. If this is true, I want him to tell me now that I'm fully awake."

When Rose tried to get up, the pain was still there except it wasn't

as fierce. There was a walking stick beside her chair, leaning against the table.

"JT made that for you," Annabelle told her. "He spent all day yesterday while you were sleeping sitting on the porch whittling away. It was sweet yet sad, really."

"Do you know where JT is now?"

"He took your parents to the train depot. I suspect he'll walk through the door any moment. He hasn't been two feet away from you since that big, muscular cowboy brought you home the other day."

Rose giggled. She hadn't heard anyone describe Grant that way. "His name is Grant."

"Whatever his name is, the cowboy needs a good, hard working woman to keep him happy. I plan to be that woman."

Rose shook her head as she limped toward the front door. If anyone could tame Grant, she supposed Annabelle would be a good match.

Rose made herself comfortable on the front porch as she waited for JT. It was time the two decided their future together.

His quiet strength was the first thing Rose noticed when she saw him. "I think you would have made an excellent reverend, even if you didn't know the verses very well."

JT turned his head. He sat on the seat beside her. "Rose, about that whole ordeal."

Rose placed a finger over his mouth. "Shhh, I don't want to know. Not yet. I want you to hear what I have to say."

He nodded. "I'm sorry."

"I am the one who is sorry, JT. When I came here hoping to get away from my father for good, I never thought my actions my cause harm to this town. I was a coward. Instead of facing him and insisting he didn't have the power to marry me off, I ran."

JT brushed his knuckles across her cheek. He bent close, following with a light kiss. "Your father was plain mean. A woman didn't stand a chance. I'm sorry I didn't protect you more."

She smiled. "You didn't know me, JT. As I didn't know you."

He shrugged. "You are wrong there, Rose. I've known you since the day you stumbled across the pasture when Misty threw you off. I

watched your determination as you mounted her again and again until the two of you rode like the wind."

She turned, her eyes wide as if just realizing something. "It was you then, all along. There *was* someone watching me."

"I'm afraid so. I wanted to come forward, tell you who I was. But at the same time I didn't want to disturb your moments with Misty. I knew how your father was and how the time you spent riding was so sacrilegious to you."

"I remember seeing you once on that hill. You were like a King, lording over the property." Rose laughed, the vivid picture of him as if it was yesterday all over again. "I almost rode Misty up there to meet you."

"What stopped you? Whenever you were out and about, you were never alone."

"That was Delilah. She had been my nanny for years and then we became friends. Knowing my schedule, she never let me out of her site after I told her about you up on the hillside watching me."

"Ah, so it wasn't a fear of seeing me then. That's a relief."

"I never felt afraid."

JT took her hand. As if on cue, he slid to the wooden planks on one knee. "My beautiful Rose, I can't pretend any longer. When I saw you in another man's arms, I fell apart."

"Another man's arms? Do you mean when I danced with Sandy? Oh, dear!"

He shook his head. "When Grant brought you home, he stood at that door with you in his arms. I wanted to kill him before I realized he was acting under the orders of Elizabeth and Noah."

Rose was secretly pleased even though he had no reason to be upset with Grant. "I assure you, he was a total gentleman. Why, he had hardly spoken two words the whole way from their ranch."

"Rose, forget Grant. Will you be my wife?"

"You sure get right to the point."

"I can no longer wait. I want you as my wife, today."

Rose didn't want to wait either. "How do we know that Reverend Goodson will marry us today?"

“Tell me, Rose, tell me you will marry me!”

Rose giggled. “I will, JT.”

He stood up, lifting her along with him and swung her around. Before he let her down, he kissed her.

“Put me down,” she whispered against his mouth. There were a few people standing in the street, staring.

“I’m sorry, let’s go find Reverend Goodson.” He lifted Rose up, carrying her in his arms the whole way down the street. “There’s going to be a wedding today,” he shouted to the others.

Halfway down the block there were close to twenty people following. One of the old men shouted to a man with his head hanging out the door of his business. “Close up for an hour, there’s a wedding in progress.”

Rose tried to hide her face in his chest. After everyone began shouting about the wedding, she lifted her head up and began to laugh, too. This town loved a celebration.

Rose was carried over the threshold of the church right up to the alter. Reverend Goodson was suspiciously there, his bible in hand. Rose looked at JT sharply. “How did he know?”

JT shrugged before he winked at her. He placed her alongside of him, one arm around her waist so she had something to lean on. Her ankle still was not strong enough to take the weight completely and JT was fully aware.

The whole town eventually crowded in to the new church. Every single bench was filled to capacity.

JT turned to the crowd. “Before we get married, I have a confession to make. I’m not a reverend by a long shot. I knew Reverend Goodson was delayed and took advantage of that fact. I was trying to win my soon to be wife’s heart because I wanted her to get to know me, not someone her father was forcing her to marry. I thought it was the perfect way and I was sorely wrong. I hope you find it in your hearts to forgive me for my sins.”

One of the townsfolk stood up, a grin on his face. “Why, son, we all knew you wasn’t no preacher! How daft do you think we are?”

“You knew?” JT looked stunned.

“Of course we knew. We figured you’d come to your senses sooner or later. Why if the truth be told, I ain’t no baker either. And I didn’t rob no dang bank five years ago, either. I was just curious and rode along with the gang. Why, I was so inconsequential I never even got my mug put on a wanted poster so I’m in the clear on that one, it was a close call. But, we all have a past.”

One woman stood. “I didn’t work in a saloon either.”

The other woman sitting beside her stood. “And I never, ever ran away from home with my Uncle’s pocket watch.” Rose giggled when she noticed the gold piece hanging from the woman’s manly vest.

The crowd mumbled until the reverend spoke up. “It looks as if I have a lot of redeeming to do in this town. I do believe I was rightly called here. Now, let’s have a wedding!”

Rose and JT looked at each other. JT dipped his head and kissed Rose as if she were the only one in the room. “I love you,” he whispered between kisses.

“I love you, too.”

The reverend coughed. “It appears we are jumping the gun, folks. Now if you don’t mind, I want to talk to you about how Jesus -”

Rose doubted JT heard a word of what was being said. He kept his eyes intently on hers, with promises of a life for the both of them. It was more than Rose had ever dreamed of.

After what seemed like hours, Reverend Goodson announced their marriage to all. “I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

As there lips touched, the crowd began to clap and yell out.

JT gathered her in his arms, promising not to ever let her go.

They were home.

At last.

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Thank you for reading Rose and JT’s story. While JT and Rose work at building a new life in Mill Ridge, Annabelle is thrown in to the job of proprietor of the boarding house.

Not for long though.

Grant was injured in a shoot out when he was a Texas Ranger. The doctor told him he would never get better if he didn't take care of himself. He laughed it off, swearing he'd rest when he was six feet under.

Annabelle saw a hurting man underneath all that toughness. She was determined to bring him back to life and good health. At least there was someone she can save, unlike her past, which hopefully would not follow her to Mill Ridge. More mysteries and secrets abound in the next book:

Keep reading for The Ranger's Redemption

The Ranger’s Redemption

Book 3

Annabelle Hart is determined to redeem the Texas Ranger who had been injured during a shoot-out. Forced in marriage after an innocent mistaken ordeal, can Annabelle turn this cold-hearted man around?

Grant Jennings wanted to be left alone. He didn't think anyone would ever want a man with a limp. When Annabelle shows up, things change. But was it for the better? Or worse?

Chapter 1

Go after life as if it's something that's got to be roped in a hurry before it gets away. -unknown

Grant nudged open the door to the boarding house with the tip of his boot. Pushing his way inside, he almost dropped Miss Rose when he looked up to find a beautiful woman standing in front of the parlor window, the sun shining from behind, making her whole body glow. It was like a halo surrounding this angelic creature. Her calm, sky-blue eyes stared into his soul, as if she recognized a troubled heart for what it was.

Slender arms reached out to him, as if commanding him to come closer. Mesmerized, his feet moved forward as if he were in a trance. The pain that usually tore down his left leg disappeared. She was calling out, gesturing him on.

An older man moved his lips, ordering him to put Miss Rose down, while an ageing woman, who was most likely the man's wife, said something before slapping a hand across her mouth. He ignored them both, looking back in to the angel's eyes as she gestured for him to place Rose on the settee. He followed her instructions and instead of lowering Rose gently, he almost dropped her there.

"Sir, please, be gentle." She turned her head then to speak to one of the others, ordering a dark-haired girl to make Rose comfortable. Turning back to Grant, she took him firmly by the arm. "You must be exhausted. I insist you sit down over here and have some tea before you explain what happened."

Grant followed her, which was highly unusual for a man like him. He wasn't used to taking orders from anyone. He was a man of few

words and didn't follow any rules. That was what had made him an excellent Texas Ranger.

Now, here he was, sitting at a table with a fancy white linen tablecloth and a cup of hot tea in front of him. He raised his head and laughed out loud. "I'm not drinking that nasty stuff."

For some reason Grant wanted to see how far he was able to push this sweet talking woman. Her beauty and calmdemeanor was getting the best of him. He had to get out from under her trance. He had heard about women like her. With one look, a man was powerless. Was she a witch in disguise?

She came closer, gently bending down to whisper in his ear. "If you don't pick up that cup and begin to drink, I will insist you stay for dinner and place you beside the older man sitting by the window. He likes to tell stories of days long ago about his journey on the wagon train. Long, drawn out stories and he forgets most of it, repeating himself over and over. It may take you a long time to get back home."

If she thought for one moment that would scare him, why, she had another think coming. No one got the best of Grant Jennings.

No one.

"Yes, ma'am," he found himself saying instead of his normal insults. "My apologies for being rude." It wasn't that he worried about what anyone else thought, he didn't. It was her warm breath that danced across his skin when she whispered those words. Her entrancing voice and softness mesmerized him. He squeezed his eyes shut briefly to force her beauty from his mind, then reached for the cup of tea and gulped its contents down in one smooth swallow.

Grant jerked up out of the chair in one quick movement, marched to the door, swung it open while nodding to the others, his mouth filled with the bitter hot liquid. He desperately leaned over the railing on the front porch and spit the awful tasting brew out. Reaching in his vest pocket, he brought out a metal flask, popping off the lid before taking a long slug of the fiery liquid. "That's much better."

"There will be no imbibing of alcohol on this property, sir."

Grant didn't want to turn around. He knew if he did, she would look at him with those blue sparkling eyes and bewitch him once

again. He kept his back to her while he replaced the flask. It was rude but he was helpless in her presence. “Name’s Grant Jennings, not sir.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Mr. Jennings. I am Annabelle Hart. I didn’t ask you to drink the whole cup of tea in one swallow! Why, it’s no wonder you burned your mouth.”

When he finally decided to brave the wind and turn around, there she stood, hands on her hips, her head slightly cocked and her eyes right on his mouth. Staring at it as if trying to decide how to make it better. He sighed. Why had he let Elizabeth talk him into bringing Rose here? This was a huge mistake. He didn’t know there would be such an infuriatingly beautiful woman at the end of the journey. Grant didn’t need anyone to interfere with his quiet, sullen life.

“I’ve got to get back,” he told her, tipping his wide-brimmed hat before walking to the edge of the porch. Except she stood there, her pointy-toed boots planted firmly on the ground, dead center in his way. It didn’t seem as if she were going to move out of the way real soon.

“Sir, er, Mr. Jennings. I am grateful to you for bringing Rose home to us, but, please tell me what happened? She had gone to see Elizabeth earlier today and was perfectly fine?”

“She accidentally tripped and hurt her ankle. I checked it thoroughly but she should let the doctor take a look. When she insisted on coming back here instead of resting at the ranch for a few days, I was volunteered to escort her.”

The woman nodded, her hands still on her hips, blocking the way for him to go down the few steps without brushing past her. It was as if she knew she’d have to step aside in order for him to leave and wasn’t about to move. What game was this lady playing with him?

“I’m glad she is ok. I’ll ask Nurse Ellie to take a look in the morning when her husband, Dr. James, comes to town.”

‘You do that. Now, if you don’t mind, it’s getting late. I must be on my way.”

The angel raised an eyebrow when he did. “By all means, then, goodnight.”

Again, she didn’t make any attempt to move out of the way.

Grant leaned in, his face close to her ear as she had done to him earlier. “You’re in my way,” he told her, his low voice rumbling softly against her skin. Instead of being a perfect gentleman and stepping back, Grant lingered there, taking in the lavender scent radiating from her whole body.

“I am sorry,” she whispered, taking a tiny step back at last. He looked down to the wooden floor, then back in her beautiful eyes and grinned.

“Not far enough,” he said. Then he dipped his head and brushed her mouth so lightly he felt her shiver.

She moved out of the way, her back now against the door, giving him plenty of room to leave. Her eyes were bright, unlike before, he didn’t know if she was frightened or delighted.

All he knew was he had to get out of there. With a firm twist that almost toppled him to the ground, Grant groaned out loud as he overstepped his foot as pain shot through his wounded leg. He brushed a hand over his leg as if that could stop the shooting spasms. It almost doubled him over.

“Mr. Jennings, are you alright?” She stepped forward.

He held up a hand. “I’m fine. Good night.”

“I can have someone take a look at your leg.”

Grant turned one last time. “I don’t need anyone looking at me,” he told her, his gruff voice causing her to furrow her brow again.

He didn’t want to mount his horse while she stood there. “Go on, now, get back inside and help Miss Rose.”

“Why, you rude man,” she told him. “I don’t take kindly to someone ordering me like so.” Her nose lifted in the air but all he saw was the creamy white skin of her neck. He sucked in the night air, needing to break the trance this woman had and still placed on him.

“Your face will stay like that if you don’t go on now,” he teased.

She took a step forward, her hands back on her hips. “I’ve never in my life had anyone be so rude. There is nothing wrong with my face.”

“You are scowling.”

“I am not.” She rubbed a hand over her brow to check. Then her finger began to shake up and down. “Mr. Jennings, you are trying to

scare me off. I can read you like a book! Why, I had two brothers who acted just like you and there wasn't much they could get past me!"

"I'm not your brothers," he told her, deciding she would never leave the porch. He took the reins and began to walk the horse down the street.

"You are leaving in the middle of a conversation?" Her voice was incredulous, except it sounded more like smooth honey.

"Goodnight, Miss Hart."

"Goodnight, Mr. Jennings. We will continue this conversation at a later time."

He let it go at that. The slam of the door reassured him she had stepped back inside. Grant stopped his horse long enough to pull himself on to the saddle. It took him several tries but he accomplished it without anyone looking on.

Grant never took his cane with him when he came to town. No one was going to call him a cripple. Even though it helped balance him, he wasn't going to be ridiculed because he had to use a walking stick. A limp was one thing, but a cane showed the rest of the world he was a weakling. He didn't want anyone to know he needed something to lean on. Grant didn't need anyone or anything to lean on except for himself.

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Annabelle brushed past the mirror hanging in the hallway. Her eyes were bright, cheeks flushed. She stopped for a moment to tidy her hair, which seemed to be out of place. Of course, she was really checking to make sure she didn't have a scowl on her face like he had told her. Why did Mr. Jennings get under her skin so badly?

She had never, ever spoken to anyone the way she had to him, reprimanding him like he was a small child. Why was she doing this? What did she care if he stood on her front porch taking a swig of liquor? The only conclusion must be to help the pain he tried to hide. He didn't seem like a drinking man but maybe she was wrong about him. No, Annabelle knew how a drinking man behaved and he wasn't

at all like her father had been.

The poor man, he was incredibly brave for trying to act as if nothing was wrong when it was plain to see he had been hurt badly at one time or another.

Her fingers touched her lips, remembering how he feathered a kiss across them. A gentleman would never, ever behave in such a manner and yet, he had. The thing is she did nothing to stop him. Annabelle took one last look in the mirror before turning all her attention to Rose. It was impossible to breathe while thinking of that man!

As the good reverend took Rose in his arms and carried her off to her room so she could rest, Annabelle began to make supper.

All throughout the evening, Annabelle kept seeing images of Grant Jennings in her mind. He seemed to be a troubled soul. Without trying to pry, she wanted to bring up the subject at the table and found the perfect opportunity during the prayer.

Reverend Pope was almost finished when Annabelle chimed in. "Thank you, Lord and Saviour, for Mr. Jennings, who brought our Rose home safely."

"Here, here," another of the renters added.

After everyone began to eat, Reverend Pope pushed his food around on the plate. "Thank you for saying those words, Miss Hart."

"Reverend Pope, you are welcome. I might ask about Mr. Jennings. He seems to be a troubled man, and his limp looks quite painful. Is there something we can do to thank him?"

The reverend nodded. "He owns a farm beside Noah and Elizabeth Holloway. I've heard it's a struggle for him with his bad leg but he keeps working just as hard as any other man. Perhaps we can send some men there to give him a hand. I'll talk to a few townsfolk."

"What a nice gesture, but he doesn't seem to be receptive to help of any kind. I tried to offer him a helping hand when his leg almost gave out as he was leaving, only for him to refuse."

"You are correct. Jennings is a loner, a private man. He was a Texas Ranger before getting hurt. He could use prayers and a friend."

"How so, Reverend?" She picked up her spoon even though she wasn't hungry at all.

He shrugged. “Everyone needs someone. We were not made to be alone. He keeps to himself. Noah mentioned the other day that Grant’s home is now finished and that is where the man spends most of his time, alone in an empty shell. Noah keeps finding ways to get him out on the range.”

“What a terrible way to live. Perhaps as a thank you, I will take a basket filled with baked goods.”

“That would be very nice and neighborly,” he told her, pushing back the wooden chair. “I better see to Rose.”

The reverend disappeared to check on Rose. He seemed highly concerned. It was clear to everyone in the boarding house the two were madly in love. Earlier today she had to shoo him out of the room so she could bath Rose. He took to the porch, rocking back and forth, whittling away at a cane for her to use when she felt better. It would be awhile until Rose was back on her feet.

Annabelle would do her best to keep the boarding house moving along. When the reverend carried Miss Rose to her room to rest, he swore up and down he would marry her as soon as she was feeling better. He had said it in front of everyone in the room. She assumed she would be the one taking over since Caroline needed more training. The younger girl was shy and found it hard to speak to the renters.

Miss Addie had told her it would be her duty to train Caroline and bring her out of her shell. She squared her shoulders. It seemed that not only did Caroline need her, but so did that rough, tough former Texas ranger.

“Caroline, we best get these dishes cleaned up. Would you care to join me in an evening walk?”

Caroline nodded with her head down. She never looked anyone in the eye. It was strange since they had been rescued from a fate worse than death awhile back. The good folks in the town of Wichita Falls had rescued all the mail order brides, giving every single one a new lease on life. You would think Caroline would smile now and again, remembering how lucky she was. Perhaps it was due time Annabelle reminded her.

Annabelle held a basket over her one arm and linked her other

through Caroline's stiff arm. She turned to the younger woman. "Caroline, I'm not a prude by any means, but I feel it is in your best interest to have a word with you."

Caroline nodded.

Annabelle sighed. "Can you talk at all, dear?"

She nodded again, her chin in a down position.

Annabelle stopped. "Caroline, look at me! Please. I'm growing frustrated with your lack of communication. We most certainly should be grateful at all the good folks around us who rescued us from that terrible man. Can't you at least seem grateful and smile now and again?"

Annabelle felt the tension rising as Caroline's arm stiffened even more. Perhaps she was being too harsh. "I'm sorry. Let's start over."

Caroline slowly lifted her chin, turning her face to Annabelle. She was beautiful beyond measure. High cheekbones protruded from a lovely heart shaped face. Dark eyelashes flickered before staring in to Annabelle's own.

Annabelle gasped.

Caroline closed her eyes, squeezing them shut as if it would close out the world.

"No, no, Caroline. Open your eyes. Let me see."

Caroline shook her head at first until Annabelle insisted. When she did, Annabelle was amazed at the colors. One eye was blue, as blue as the ocean while the other had speckles of green. Caroline finally spoke up. "I am ashamed."

"Nonsense, your eyes are unique." Annabelle had never noticed before. She doubted anyone had since Caroline always looked at the floor. Now she understood why.

As if a burden was brushed from her shoulders, Caroline began to speak even more. "They told me I am a witch with eyes of a different color. It's why I left Boston. I was shunned by my peers because of the color of my eyes. I don't want anyone here to think I am a witch."

Annabelle patted Caroline's arm. "A curse to those who would say such things," she told her. "You will not find people like that here, not in Mill Ridge. I'll prove it to you. Come along."

Annabelle spent the rest of the evening introducing Caroline to the other townsfolk. A few stared but didn't mention a thing while some others were so fascinated they invited Caroline for desert.

Back at the boarding house, Annabelle was relieved to see her young protégée was beginning to relax. She would work on her a tiny bit more before leaving her in charge of the house. "Tomorrow we will go about our business and do the same thing. I truly want you to be able to run this boarding house with confidence."

Caroline looked right in to her eyes and smiled, showing more and more confidence as the day went on. Annabelle wanted to jump up and down with glee. Instead, she gave the girl a warm hug. "Now, let's plan our morning for tomorrow. I have an idea for a way to thank our former Texas Ranger for bringing our Rose home."

Annabelle knew without a doubt baking a delicious cake would put a smile on the ranger's face. No one could refuse her grandmother's desserts and she had learned how to bake them almost as if her grandmother were still here. Perhaps if she showed him some simple kindness, the ranger would come out of his shell.

Annabelle wondered why she was so determined to take on the cause of reforming Mr. Jennings. Maybe it was the sadness she noticed deep in his eyes. Plus, when he had looked at her it made her shiver in spite of herself.

The next morning Annabelle rapped steadily on Caroline's door, waking her up earlier than usual. "Rise and shine, Caroline! The day starts when the rooster crows."

Caroline worked alongside her all morning, helping with breakfast and cleaning up afterwards. As if a burden had been lifted from the younger woman, she jumped in with a fervor Annabelle hadn't seen before. Annabelle was so proud her friend had faced those awful fears. She needed to let Caroline know. "I'm proud of you, Caroline. I feel confident when I take the baked goods to Mr. Jenning's farm, I can leave you in charge. Well done."

Caroline chatted away all morning long as the two finished the chores and began a full afternoon of baking. Annabelle, satisfied, began to think about visiting the Jenning's farm. "This evening we

will apply some of my grandmother's delicious icing and the cake will be ready to go in the morning. If there is any leftover beef stew, we can send some along with a loaf of fresh bread."

The next morning, after placing everything in a spare basket, Caroline peeked at her underneath her long, lovely lashes. "Annabelle, are you sure you should visit alone?"

"Noah and Elizabeth are right next door. I doubt I will be in any danger."

"Are you sure? I can come along if you'd like?"

Annabelle turned to stare at her protégée. Overnight, she had become this responsible adult instead of the downward trodden mouse she had been. All it took was a bit of persuasion. If Caroline could come out of her shell so easily, Annabelle was now more than certain she had the distinct gift of turning lives around. The Ranger was next in line.

As she got in the buggy, a smile played across her lips. Mr. Jennings most certainly would not be able to say no to a simple gift of food.

Chapter 2

Timing has a lot to do with the outcome of a rain dance. -unknown

Grant stumbled out of bed, surprised he had slept in this morning. As a Texas Ranger, he was always up before the sun came up, or sleeping in intermittent spurts. Since retiring from the profession, he had to force himself out of bed some days. Grant ran a shaky hand over unruly hair, then brushed a hand over his whiskers while the bright sunlight streaked through the window just as it had yesterday at the boarding house.

Why did he think of her the moment he saw those rays of sunlight? It was like that last night, too, while he laid in bed trying to close his eyes. He had her image in her mind before finally dozing off, those beautiful blue eyes staring deep in his soul. Annabelle Hart. Even her name was angelic.

Shaking himself, Grant pulled on his pants, buttoning them to the waist. He supposed it was time for a shave even though he didn't know why. Living on the farm, the only people he ever ran in to were Noah and his wife and the other ranch hands. Besides an occasional trek to Mill Ridge, Grant stayed to himself. It was better to be alone. Especially now.

He slapped a small towel over one shoulder, along with his shirt, while his fingers fumbled for his shaving cup and razor. Making his way outside, the bright sun almost blinded him, causing his feet to stumble down the two steps off the front porch. Dust from the ground twirled around his legs as he made his way the few feet to the pump.

Grant pumped the handle, letting cool water run out slowly while

he lathered his chin and neck with the soap and brush. Reaching inside the cup, he pulled out a strait razor, sliding it over his rough cheek, not even needing a mirror at this point. He had blindly shaven too many times while out on a mission. Through cuts and nicks and more, there wasn't a time Grant hadn't made sure to take care of himself.

He had tried to stay healthy while chasing murderers and bank robbers, thieves and wanted men who sooner or later would make a futile mistake. Grant figured if he took care of what God gave him, he'd be in tip top shape to catch them without a hitch. Most of the time wearing out the opponent was the game at hand and he usually won. It wasn't too often he'd had to shoot anyone dead.

Grant sighed. Since he got himself shot at the last gig, his life just didn't seem to matter as much. He was lucky to be alive, wasn't he? Now he had a bum leg with no future in sight. The ranch he was building was a big deal, took most of his savings, but he was empty inside. Grant was no longer whole. The constant ache in his leg told him every single day he wasn't worth a damn.

In the distance he heard the sound of horse's hooves coming down the lane towards his home. He didn't bother to turn around, it was probably Noah stopping by to rouse him up. The man was relentless, even when Grant tried to send him away he still wouldn't let Grant wallow in self-pity. Just like today, even if he was a bit late.

He lathered more cream on his face. The sun glared in his eyes but he caught the edge of a buggy pulling up.

A woman's voice called out to the horse. "Whoa there, honey!"

Grant watched as the angel of his dreams sat on the seat of the small open buggy. She held the reins in her gloved hand while searching the area for a place to tie them.

He grinned. Who called their horse, honey? She was even more appealing than the visions he had created all night long. Her blue eyes turned to him right as he was trying to conceal a smile.

"Oh my dear heavens!"

Grant watched in wonder as she turned away, placing a hand in front of her to cover her eyes. Stepping from the buggy, a slim hand

pulled the wide brimmed hat down over her eyes as she came closer.

"Watch the prairie dog holes! You parked at a bad place!"

"Please, cover yourself, sir!"

Grant looked down to find his chest bare. He forgot he didn't have a shirt on but wasn't expecting any visitors. Especially her! His shirt was hanging over the edge of the pump handle but he made no effort to cover up.

She picked up the hem of her skirts with one hand while carrying a basket in the other, tip-toeing across the yard. Grant stood there, watching, amused as she tried to avoid the small holes.

As she got closer, he was mesmerized by her beauty. When those eyes finally found his, hers widened in surprise, as if looking at him for the first time. Just as she was about to stop, a little prairie dog zipped close by, racing over the tip of her boot. She shrieked in surprise and horror.

Annabelle stumbled forward. Grant dropped the razor, reaching out in hopes to break her fall. The moment his arm caught her, his leg went out under him, jerking in spasms from the sudden movement. The ground was rising to meet him as the force of Annabelle's body slammed in to him. Grant turned the right way so he would hit the ground first, causing her to land dead on top of him.

For a moment no one moved. Grant's arms were tight around Annabelle as her full weight beared down on his own. He didn't want to let go. So, he didn't. The softness of her body on top of his drew him in. Her face was buried deep in his neck. Her soft gasps trickled across his skin. Grant shivered at the touch.

Somewhere in the background he heard the sound of wheels from a second buggy. The clip clop of hooves sounded so far away they were soon forgotten.

Grant closed his eyes, knowing he would have to help her up and yet he waited. For what, he didn't know. His angel had landed on him and he wasn't about to give her up yet.

She stirred, causing an ache inside of him. A small moan left his lips as he lightly kissed the top of her head. Breathing in the lilac scent aroused him more. "Are you okay?"

“I am not certain.” Her voice shook.

“Don’t move then. Give it a minute.” Grant tightened his hold as she snuggled even more in to him. With eyes closed, his back on the ground, he allowed himself one moment of wishful thinking. She was his for the moment, holding on to him as if he were her lifeline. It was a darn good feeling since the accident. As if someone truly needed him.

He knew someone stood above them the moment the sun was blocked out. Dreading the thought of coming back to reality, Grant opened his eyes. Miss Addie stood over the two of them, her lips pursed as if the devil had come to town.

“It’s not what you think!” Grant told her.

“What’s not?” Annabelle lifted her head as if it were the last thing she wanted to do. “Oh, my lands!” Pushing away, she righted herself, standing up and dusting her skirts as if they were on fire instead of dirty from the ground. Already, Grant missed the feel of her.

One brow shot up from Miss Addie. “I am afraid you have been compromised, Annabelle.”

Grant sat up, unable to get up from the ground without making a fool of himself. His leg ached more now that her softness had left him. The pain shooting down his leg was real, its spasms causing his whole body to shake. “She fell,” Grant started to say until Miss Addie gave him a look.

“It’s true, Miss Addie. I was merely bringing a basket filled with food as a thank you for helping with Miss Rose. Look around, the contents have spilled all over the ground. It’s not what you think, I assure you.”

“I do believe you. It’s not myself we have to worry about.” With further ado, she moved out of the way. Reverend Conners and his wife sat in the buggy, eyes narrowed. Mrs. Conners had a look of disbelief written all over her face.

“Oh, dear.” Annabelle froze, then with a nervous energy began to pick up the contents of the basket.

The reverend of Wichita Falls helped his wife from the buggy before making their way over.

Grant looked up at the others, confused. “It’s an accident, I assure you. My leg went out,” he tried to say but a sharp spasm tore through right at that moment. He grabbed his thigh, trying to massage the pain away.

Annabelle scurried over. “Your leg, are you hurt?” She kneeled down alongside him, ignoring the others, placing a hand over his. “Let me help,” and began to dig her fingertips into his flesh. The pain began to relent almost immediately.

A tiny cough from Miss Addie had him look up. He almost forgot the others were here. “Annabelle,” he whispered her name softly. She was concentrating so hard on his leg at first she must have also forgot about the others as well.

From the corner of his eye, a lone rider galloped across the prairie. Grant knew it was Noah. Now maybe these others would leave and let him get back to what he had been doing before.

It didn’t stop the reverend and his wife. They stood stiff as boards, watching the two as Annabelle made sure the spasms were gone. He should stop her but found the pain subsiding. He didn’t have the energy to do much else. The relief from her massage had him closing his eyes again, revelling in this glorious feeling that his leg was whole once more.

“What’s going on here, Grant?”

Noah knew where the prairie dog holes were, so he had dismounted away from the crowd. Walking over, he acknowledged the pastor and his wife. “Miss Addie,” he said, “What brings you folks all the way out to this farm?”

Even though Grant knew he should stand up, the thought of needing help to get up without looking like a fool kept him right there on the ground. Noah eyed him and nodded. He was the only one that knew how Grant struggled.

“We are delivering invitations to our yearly Christmas Ball in Wichita Falls. Lilly and Ben Sloan have been gracious enough to allow the town to have the party at their hotel.”

Grant shook his head. “Thanks for the invite but I’ll pass.” He knew there would be dancing. How was a man like him going to dance with

a crippled leg?

Noah raised a brow. “Let’s get you up, Grant.” Annabelle had moved away.

“Don’t need any help.” Grant was determined no one would see him at his most vulnerable.

No one listened. Reverend Conner and Noah took him under the arms and pulled him upright. Noah did feel better now that he wasn’t looking up at everyone and it wasn’t as embarrassing as he first thought. Actually, no one thought any less of him. He brushed imaginary dust from his pants and straightened. “Thanks.”

The reverend began his lecture. “Don’t be ashamed of what you are, sir. The good Lord has a plan for you, rest assured.”

Grant groaned. He didn’t care for a lecture on his own property. “Maybe the good Lord wasn’t paying attention when I got shot because this leg is not healing.”

Noah spoke up. “If you’d rest now and again instead of pushing yourself too much, it would. The doctor told you so.”

“The doc don’t know my leg.” Grant had enough. “The shows over, go on now everyone.”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple.”

Grant raised his eyes to see the intent in the reverends. “What do you mean?”

“Miss Addie, will you please hand Mr. Jennings his shirt?”

Grant stepped forward, the ache in his leg subsided for now. Thanks to Annabelle’s touch. He spared a look her way to see the horrified look on her face. “What is going on here? Miss Addie?” When he turned to the older woman, she held out his shirt. Shaking off the dust before handing it to him, a suspicion began to make his blood boil. “You can’t possibly think I have compromised Miss Hart?”

Miss Addie remained silent.

“Reverend Conners? Mrs. Conners?” Grant turned to see Annabelle biting her lip, her head down, the wide brim of the hat covering the top portion of her face. It was impossible to read her thoughts.

The reverend pulled a bible from his jacket. “I’m afraid we will have to marry the two of you before word of this atrocity gets out.”

Mrs. Conners nodded. Her hand went up, covering her face. Grant watched the reverend's wife. He swore there was a grin behind her delicate hand.

Annabelle stepped forward. "We are in modern society, Reverend Conners. I was merely helping a poor soul. He's telling the truth, I stepped in a hole and we toppled to the ground. Mr. Jennings was merely coming to my rescue."

He continued to shake his head. "Even so, Miss Hart, the damage is done. Polite society, even here in the west, will not allow our conscious to ignore what happened. There will be a wedding."

"There will not be a wedding." Grant stood firm.

Reverend Conner turned to Grant. "You, sir, would not want word to get out that you did not do the right thing, am I correct in thinking this? I am willing to make this right and if you choose to ignore my recommendations, poor Miss Hart will never be able to hold her head up again."

Grant stared at the preacher. He was kidding, wasn't he? When Conners didn't crack a smile, he realized he was duped. If he didn't marry Annabelle, her honor was ruined according to the reverend. "We are the only ones who know what happened. No one else will know if everyone keeps their mouth shut."

Reverend Conner's wife gasped.

Annabelle groaned out loud.

Miss Addie stood there, stoic and uncompromising. Her eyes glowed as if she were allowing all this to happen. The look in her eyes said it was for the best. Grant wanted to turn and walk away.

Noah placed an arm across his shoulder. "Maybe this is what is next for you, Grant. Lord knows you've been trying to start this ranch and care for your house by yourself. Having someone by your side will be a good thing."

Having Annabelle by his side wouldn't be so bad. Especially since he did get to hold her in his arms. It made him hunger for her more and more. He looked up at the blue sky. If this was a sign, having a woman fall on him, then perhaps he would go along with their request. He addressed her. "Miss Hart, what do you say. Would you

like to be married?"

Annabelle kept biting her bottom lip. Grant wanted to brush his mouth over hers. He supposed if she agreed then he would get a taste sooner than later. She looked at Miss Addie first. "I'm afraid I can't possibly run a boarding house and this farm house."

Miss Addie smiled. "Oh, my dear, do not fret. You left Caroline in charge. She will do fine and I'll stay with her for a few days to ensure such."

"Are you sure, Miss Addie? I don't want to disappoint."

"I'm certain. I have a good feeling about this situation." The older woman stared at Grant, then his leg. He wasn't sure exactly what she meant but his leg had begun to ache again.

"Then I accept the offer," Annabelle whispered.

"Let's get on with this," he told Reverend Conners. "I have work to do."

Grant stood beside Annabelle as the reverend read from the bible. Mrs. Conners stood beside her husband while Miss Addie and Noah stood beside him while the ceremony took place.

Finally, the words to kiss the bride were here. He turned to Annabelle. She pushed the brim of her hat out of her face. Blue eyes tore in to his, they were bright and anxious. Was she afraid or in a hurry to be kissed by him?

He didn't keep her waiting. Slowly, as if she were so fragile, he lowered his mouth to hers in a soft kiss. He was afraid to do more than brush over her lips, nervous he would not be able to stop once he touched what he had dreamt of doing the night before.

She pushed against him as if it couldn't be helped. He had to be the stronger one here, there was an audience watching. He moved away, taking her hand and giving the top a brief kiss. "Welcome to Jennings Farm, Mrs. Jennings."

"Thank you, Mr. Jennings. Now, I must be going."

He laughed. "That a fact? Where, pray tell are you going?"

She smiled. "To town to fetch my belongings. We have a ton of work to do." Annabelle marched back to her buggy while waving to the others. "I'll be back before you know it, Mr. Jennings."

Then she disappeared down the road. The others were standing there watching the dust rise up.

“She is behaving in the most peculiar way,” Miss Addie mentioned.

Mrs. Conners actually spoke, which was highly unusual for the quiet woman. “It’s bridal nerves. She will catch her breath and settle down.”

Grant stood listening to the two women. He stepped back, realizing for the first time he was now a married man. There was no longer any time to feel sorry for himself. He stared at the structure he called home.

Noah stood beside him. “It truly needs a woman’s touch, Grant.”

“I suppose you’re right. Should I go after her?”

Noah shook his head. “No, she’ll be back with a buggy full of frilly things like material to make curtains and bedsheets and such. It’s going to be interesting to watch from this end.”

“I have no idea what to do with a wife. I barely get through the day without doubling over in pain. No wife wants a crippled husband.”

Noah grinned. “She’ll take over your home and your heart in no time. This will be good for Elizabeth, to have someone so close by. She can come right over the ridge to visit.”

“Good, then maybe she’ll leave me alone.”

Noah sighed. “To leave you wallow in self pity? I highly doubt you’ll get what you want, Grant. Annabelle doesn’t seem like she’ll put up with the likes of you feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for myself. I am in pain, you know this.”

“I know a good woman can help you forget your pain, Grant. You wait and see.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep, sure thing.”

Noah left then, leaving Grant staring at the blue sky, wondering what it would be like to live a life pain free, without waking up to shooting spasms and shots of whiskey to keep it at bay?

Chapter 3

There's two theories to arguin' with a woman. Neither one works. - unknown

After giving Caroline proper instructions, Annabelle promised to check in later in the week. "I will bring the buggy back and purchase my own horse now that I will be living on a ranch," she told Miss Addie.

The older woman agreed to stay for a few days to make sure Caroline felt comfortable taking over the household. Caroline presented herself like a whole different person now, allowing Annabelle to make her departure without causing any delays or issues with the operation of the boarding house.

"Good-bye, and best of luck. Take care of Mr. Jennings and his leg. I'm told if he rests and gets proper exercise, the leg will soon come around," Miss Addie assured her with a hug.

"I've spoken to Dr. James earlier and he said the same thing. He gave me some wonderful suggestions that I will utilize to help strengthen Grant's leg."

"Good for you. I have the utmost confidence you will succeed, Annabelle. I'll see you both at the Christmas Ball at the end of the year."

Annabelle was so excited to help Grant. She was on a mission of mercy. After speaking with Nurse Ellie and Dr. James, she had a general idea how to get Grant to take care of his leg. He was his own worst enemy, not taking care of himself properly, the doctor had said.

That was about to change even if it wasn't going to be an easy task. Time to redeem her ranger.

Annabelle stopped by the mercantile before leaving for the farm.

She had packed up all her belongings, which consisted of a ragged carpetbag and two faded hat boxes, several pouches and baskets filled with supplies and her grandmother's tins for the kitchen. Now she wandered around the shop looking for material. After pondering, she selected several shades that would brighten up Grant's dark, dull life. If she were to bring sunshine to his home, he needed colours.

"What is this?" Curiosity got the better of her. Annabelle picked up a tin from the shelf.

The mercantile owner grumbled. "The barber's wife, the one who runs the bath house in Wichita Falls, brought some of her wares here to sell. She claims the oils revive dead flesh and muscle or some crazy hogwash. If you ask me, she's a bit odd. All that talk about ancient medicine and such makes you wonder about some folks." He rolled his eyes, making her ponder.

Annabelle studied the labels. She chose two of the tins and placed them on the counter. "I think I will add these to my purchases. It sounds exactly what I need."

"If you say so." He pushed his glasses up from the tip of his nose. "There you are, Mrs. Jennings."

Annabelle jumped when he mentioned her married name. "How did you know so quickly?"

The mercantile owner leaned over the counter. "It don't take long to know things around here. Why, not an hour after the ceremony, most of the townsfolk knew about the incident. "

His voice faded almost to a whisper as if the news was a big secret. She straightened and squared her shoulders. "Well, sir, then so be it. Perhaps people should mind their business. I'm happy to be Mrs. Jennings. Good day to you."

On the way back to the farm, the extra belongings put a strain on the buggy. It was a slow, bumpy ride until she saw the farm house in the distance. She knew Noah and Rose's place was over the ridge and was excited to visit, especially since she had heard the news of the baby.

Annabelle made sure to avoid the area where those little prairie dogs bore holes in the ground. She eased the buggy parallel to the

front of the porch, close enough so she could move her belongings from the buggy without too much struggle. Grant had gone with Noah to do some work on his ranch earlier, so she knew she was on her own to carry everything inside. By the time she finished, sweat poured from her brow.

She squeezed fresh lemons from her stash, added sugar and pumped fresh water from the outside well. When her new husband made it home, she would make him a delicious glass of lemonade as well. Hopefully, the two would be able to sit on the front porch and speak like civilized adults about their future.

Annabelle put the two tins of ointment in her pocket. These would be wonderful to massage in to Grant's leg. She would start the regiment this evening after a good soak in the tub. It was time he started to listen to the doctor and begin a type of program to strengthen and ease his muscles.

The farm house wasn't big but she would make do. A rather large stove took up most of the wall on one side of the room, along with a long table to prepare meals. A few pots hung on simple nails on the wall under two shelves with items haphazardly strewn on them. Annabelle knew it wouldn't do. There was no way she would work in a place without organization.

Her belongings were setting against the wall by the door. "May as well get started." She placed the two baskets filled with supplies, along with the material for new curtains on the long table. Annabelle left the carpetbag on the floor by the door since she had no idea where she would be sleeping.

Taking a brand new apron from one of the baskets, Annabelle began the tedious task of turning the kitchen in to something she was able to work out of. She found a broom leaning against the far wall and began to break down the cobwebs hiding in corners. Twenty-five minutes later, dust covered her dress and apron.

She shook herself off and began to sweep the floor. Stirring up the dust even more, she worked her way to the front of the door while the dust encircled the air. After a straight hour of non-stop sweeping, the small ranch house was aired out. Windows were propped open, the

front door ajar, and Annabelle began to organize all her goods neatly on the two shelves.

Humming aloud, she never heard Grant come home. Miss Addie insisted she bring along left-over chicken and dumplings and the pot was warming on the stove while a fresh apple pie baked in the oven. Annabelle was so busy trying to make sure everything was perfect she jumped when he spoke.

"What's going on here?"

"Mr. Jennings, I hope you like dumplings. They are almost ready."

Grant gazed around the room, not saying a word. She kept quite still, wondering if perhaps she went too far in cleaning things up and changing things to suit her.

"I'll go wash up," he told her, disappearing before she said a word.

Annabelle's heart rate shot up. She peeked out the window, watching as he opened the top button of his shirt, then pumping the handle until a trickle of water began to flow. As he turned, his hand shot to his leg. Grant stood there, half bent over, trying to rub the pain away. His brow was creased, he was holding his breath. Closing his eyes, she wanted to run out there and help him.

Instead, she turned away. There would be time to help him later. Earlier, after looking out back, she had found a large metal tub for bathing. She had a nice surprise in store that would certainly help Grant's painful leg.

Annabelle placed the dumplings on the far end of the table where she set up a place setting for each of them and two high-backed wooden chairs. The two chairs had been in front of a long window at the other end of the room until now.

Annabelle poured water from the pail in to the big pot she set on the stove earlier. By the time they were finished with dinner, it would be hot enough for a good bath.

Grant stood behind a chair, pulling it out for her to sit. Annabelle presented him with a small grin. "Thank you." Taking her apron off, she neatly folded it up and laid it over the back of the chair before sitting down.

The moment Grant's hand reached out to pick up the ladle,

Annabelle's shot out to land on top of his. She wrapped long, slender fingers around his. "We pray first," she told him.

A low grunt came from his chest. "Why bother, it does no one any good."

Annabelle wanted to tell him how ungrateful he sounded but she stayed silent and bowed her head. Her hand covered his even when he didn't loosen his grip from the ladle. "Dear Lord, thank you kindly for Miss Addie, who was so thoughtful to send along food for us to eat. Amen." Annabelle kept it short, in fear Grant would become more resentful. She knew she was here to fix things,not upset him even more.

God would certainly understand. *Please, help me to help him, Lord.*

Grant was quiet all during dinner. Annabelle didn't know what to talk about so she didn't say anything. Grant didn't seem like the type to converse with small talk. Twice she got up and checked the water heating up to make sure it didn't boil over and for something to do to keep her nerves in check.

Grant looked up from his plate. "Why are you repeatedly getting up to look at the stove?"

Out of the blue, he had spoken his first words, his low voice sending shivers down her spine. A small smile crossed her face. "I have a nice surprise for you this evening."

"Oh? What is it?"

"I can't tell you yet or it wouldn't be a surprise now, would it?"

"I suppose you're right. Excuse me while I check on the horses." Grant pushed his chair back, his leg stiff from keeping it in one position for so long. He ran the palm of his hand over his thigh before standing awkwardly.

Annabelle quickly got up and looked away so he didn't feel embarrassed. She was learning he was a proud man. His anger was more towards himself than anyone else because his leg didn't work right.

She was about to fix everything. At least she can fix this, Annabelle reminded herself. When her father had returned from the war, he had never been the same. His leg, amputated below the knee, had been a

burden on him as he repeatedly wallowed in self-pity, drinking himself to death instead of looking for work. Annabelle found him on their front porch early one morning, before the sun came up. She vowed to herself she'd take care of the family.

Annabelle had watched as her mother sunk deeper and deeper in depression, unable to take care of three children. Annabelle jumped in and learned fast, taking care of their small home while she made sure her brothers finished school. Her skills in the kitchen improved because she was forced to make sure everyone ate, otherwise her mother would have laid there and died, too.

Except Annabelle wasn't able to fix everything. In the end, her mother left late one night and threw herself off the Santa Fe Rail road bridge. She let herself slip from the wooden swing tresses in to the ship canal below. Annabelle had followed her that night, unsure where she was going, but the look of peace and serenity on her mother's face had scared her to no end.

Annabelle had screamed for help, unable to believe her mother had slipped away in to the cold water's of the river as if she was going on a daily walk. After hours of searching, they found her body. Annabelle vowed that night she would never allow her brothers to know what had happened. They deserved a better life.

So she had worked hard, taking care of the small brick house and working at a local restaurant while her brothers finished school.

After school, Annabelle had enough money saved, along with the sale of their family house, to send the twins to medical school. She gave up the house when they left for Philadelphia, working even harder at the restaurant, living in a small room at the local boarding house while sending most of her earnings to the school to pay for their continued education. One of the twins stayed in medical school while the other quit, instead investing his meager earnings from a side job into some business venture he claimed was making him rich.

After receiving letters reassuring her the boys, now men, were okay and had a good life, Annabelle came across the ad for a mail order bride. She wanted something different. That was when she found out her dream of marriage and a family would never happen when that

horrible man tried to scam her and other potential brides. Instead of being married off, he had tried to sell them into slavery. Thank God the good Lord had been watching over them and brought the folks of Wichita Falls to save them.

Now, here she was, her giving skills becoming her saving grace once again. Determination arose in her. She would turn Grant Jennings from his life of despair and show him a good, wholesome life. After living through her parents ordeal and making it on her own for so long, Annabelle was determined this time she would not fail.

Thoughts of her two brothers and their fulfilling lives kept her moving. Annabelle went outside, leaning over the metal tub and began to drag it over the ground. She yanked and pulled on the edge, finally positioning it inside beside the kitchen. With a sigh, she began the long process of filling it with hot water.

Dipping another pot inside the large one, she slowly filled the tub since she wasn't strong enough to lift the big pot.

"What are you doing?"

Annabelle clapped her hands together. "You are just in time, Mr. Jennings."

He limped towards her, a look of confusion on his face as he stared at the tub filled with hot water. "In time for what?"

"Your medicinal bath." Annabelle went to fetch her special tin inside her carpetbag. Placing the tin on the table, she scooped up a large cupful of the needle shaped crystals, and dumped it in the hot water.

Grant leaned over and watched as the salt dissolved. "I'm not getting in there," he told her.

"Yes, you must. My grandmother's cure all will eliminate all the stress from your leg and you will be pleasantly surprised at the outcome. Please, for me, will you try this?"

Grant sighed, not softly. It was loud and although he looked annoyed, she swore he seemed impressed she would draw him a bath. After holding her breath, he nodded. "Since you went to all this trouble, sure."

Annabelle nodded. "I'll take my lemonade and sit on the porch

while you have your bath. Soak at least twenty minutes, giving the mineral compound a chance to work in to your leg and eliminate the toxins."

"Ok, whatever you say."

Annabelle picked up her glass and fled the room when Grant started to take off his shirt. He sure wasn't a shy man when it came to undressing.

She caught a glimpse as she turned to close the door, then gasped when his naked buttocks faced her. A giggle erupted from Annabelle's throat as her cheeks surely had to be bright red. "Go on now, woman," he told her, except his voice had a trace of laughter as well.

How ridiculous was her embarrassment? He was her husband now, she didn't have to feel as if she was committing a crime. There would be times when this would happen, and perhaps even the other thing. Maybe there would be babies someday. Annabelle began to rock back and forth on the strong wooden chair, contemplating a yard filled with little ones.

Having a family was her greatest wish. One that wasn't scared to live life to its fullest. Her parents, rest their souls, were afraid to live, even if their life was hard. She was ashamed and frustrated because she had seen the terrifying result of both their demises. Shielding it from her brothers had been her main focus.

Soft moans came from inside the closed door. Annabelle stood up, ready to go to him, thinking he was having spasms again. She wrapped on the door. "Are you alright in there?"

"I'm better than alright."

A smile crossed her face. She sat back down, back to her daydreaming about a big happy family.

An hour later, much later than the twenty minutes she had told him to soak, Grant came through the door, a smile on his face. Annabelle gasped at the way his eyes lit up as he directed it towards her. There was a bench where Grant lowered himself on to. He reached over and took her hand, rubbing the top slowly with his thumb. "Thank you. I'm not sure what you put in the water, but it has eased my pain tremendously."

Annabelle nodded. “I’m glad. It’s a secret potion.”

Grant relaxed even more, his wide smile making her heart skip a beat. So often he had a furrowed frown on his face and although he was a handsome man to begin with, now he was absolutely heart-stopping. She felt shy.

“A secret potion, eh?”

“My grandmothers cure-all. She called it bitter salt. The results are wondrous. A spoon in a glass of liquid helps tummy aches, the powers of the salt relieve stress and tension. I can go on and on about the calming effects of this miracle salt.”

He settled himself on the bench, leaning against one of the posts behind him. “Go on, tell me more. I like to hear your voice.”

Annabelle liked this version of Grant. He was smooth talking, happy even. She didn’t want him to revert back to his grumpy old self. “Well, there is this little town in the outskirts of England where the water is filled with a nutrient called magnesium sulphate.” Her grandmother had told her the story so many times, Annabelle knew it by heart. Whenever she’d get out her tin filled with the miracle salt, her grandmother would go on and on about its healing powers. Annabelle was honored she had given it to her before she had passed away.

Grant closed his eyes. “Your voice, it’s so, mesmerizing,” he said softly. He hadn’t let go of her hand yet. His thumb caressed hers in a slow, rotating motion.

“Epsom is the name of the little town, where the townsfolk drink this potion from stoneware mugs. It’s said to have purgative powers, shedding bad toxins from the body.”

“I say it has magical powers. My leg has never felt so good.”

Annabelle nodded. “This is wonderful news. I’ll draw you a bath each night.”

Grant opened his eyes. “Every night? You would do this for me?”

“Of course, why not? If it works you should absolutely take advantage of these salts. I can order more at the mercantile and have it shipped immediately.”

She almost forgot about the tins in her pocket. She would save

those for another day, as she wasn't sure how well they worked yet. "We need another rocking chair to set here, so we can sit together. That bench doesn't look too comfortable."

"I've made another, it's in the barn out yonder."

"You made this one?" Annabelle had admired the intricate detail of the wood, it's rounded corners and superb workmanship.

"I did. It whittles away time some days. I've got many more where that came from in the barn out yonder."

"Will you show me?" She noticed how his eyes lit up when he spoke.

Grant stood up with ease. His hand, which normally went directly to his thigh, reached out to help her instead. She walked beside him, taking her time. She wanted to run to the barn and see what he had there, but kept a slow, steady pace instead. It wouldn't do any good to over-do his leg now that he was so relaxed. He probably should not even be on it for awhile.

Grant slid the door open with ease. Bales of hay were propped up along one side, while several stalls were filled with a few of Grant's horses. They moved around, making some noise when the two walked in. On the other side, farther away from the stalls, was a wide open area with a long wooden table, even longer than the one in the house.

Annabelle's mouth hung open. "Grant, this is amazing!" Lining one side of the wall were beautiful shelves, the carvings so delicate her fingers automatically reached out to touch them. She recognized the matching rocker sitting alone in a corner. "How long have you been doing this?"

He stood tall, his face solemn as she walked around the barn, touching each piece, amazed at the detail on some of the items. He shrugged. "All my life, I guess. There were many lonely nights while staking out a wanted man that I'd have to keep busy. I whittled away at first. When I built this barn, I wasn't sure I wanted to grow a big cattle ranch like Noah is doing, you know, with my leg and all, so instead I began making this stuff."

Annabelle gave him a hug. "Oh, Grant, you don't need a big cattle ranch. Take a look around. Do you realize what you have here? Why,

any woman would love to have a shelf like this in her home. Items like this are expensive to ship west. The cost is too high for many people. If you were to sell these, you wouldn't need a ranch."

Grant cocked a brow. "What are you saying, open a furniture store? I would have to rent a store front in town for that. I doubt there would be enough business in Mill Ridge to make a sustainable living."

Annabelle shook her head. "No, not a store. We can start by taking some of these beautiful carved shelves to the mercantile shop in Mill Ridge and in Wichita Falls. Offer them for sale, opting to give the proprietor a percent of the sales for a space there. What do you say? Shall we try this?" The thought of Grant selling these items to the public would boost his self-esteem. Perhaps it would give him a purpose and take his mind from his painful leg. Annabelle would do all she could to help.

Grant walked the perimeter of the area with her. "I'm not a salesman. I don't like to talk to people much. What you are saying will require me to hold a conversation with the store owners."

Annabelle smiled. "You leave that part up to me. I love talking."

"That a fact?" His dark eyes bore in to hers. There was something there. Hope, perhaps.

"Yes, sir. A fact indeed. We shall take inventory of your items in the morning and since I must take the buggy back to Mill Ridge, I'll speak to the proprietor before we get started. I'm sure he will say yes, I noticed a few empty shelves in his store."

"You are very observant, Mrs. Jennings."

Annabelle took his hand, the warmth seeping in to her own. "We should get some rest, it's going to be a busy day tomorrow."

Grant took his time walking back to the house, holding on to her hand the whole way. He was more relaxed than she'd ever seen him.

"I do have one issue," she told him when they reached the house. "Where do I sleep?"

Annabelle knew the cabin wasn't so big it would have more than one bedroom. She watched as Grant picked up her carpetbag and opened a door at the far end of the room. "In here," he told her.

She froze, horrified as she stared at the biggest bed she'd ever seen.

It filled up most of the space in the room. There was a large dresser in the other corner alongside a larger wardrobe with more of Grant's intricate carvings. "How in the world did you get this giant bed in here?"

"I didn't." He shuffled his feet, almost embarrassed. "I made it."

"Why so big?"

He shrugged. "I am not sure. It was the first thing I made for the house. I was angry when I came here, spending a lot of time by myself. I just started to build and build and before I realized what had happened, this bed took shape."

Annabelle laughed. She flung her head back, laughing so hard tears formed in her eyes.

Grant joined in then, almost doubling over. Annabelle realized it was probably the first time he had laughed in a long, long time. "Grant, if you don't mind giving me a moment, I'd like to ready myself for bed."

"You sleep well, Mrs. Jennings."

"Please, call me Annabelle, we are married."

"Good night, Annabelle."

"Grant, where are you going. We can both sleep here, my gosh, the bed is big enough for an entire family of ten."

Grinning, Grant began to roll a quilt that was setting on the dresser. "I wasn't looking forward to sleeping in the hard wooden chair. Here," he said, taking the rolled quilt and placing it lengthwise down the middle of the bed. "I'll take this side if you would take the other. I know we hardly know each other. I'll be back later."

When Grant left to close up the house, Annabelle let out a sigh. She quickly got undressed, sliding a nightdress over her head. Taking the pins from her hair, she shook out her long tresses, before getting under the cover on her side of the bed.

A few minutes later, Grant knocked on the door. "Enter," she told him, her nerves getting the best of her. She knew he would not try to approach her yet, although he had every right to since they were married. Her breathing became faster as his side of the bed creaked when he lowered himself there. At least he was kind enough to place

the quilt between them.

"How does your leg feel?" she asked in a slightly shaky voice.

His words sounded so loud in the dark room. "The best it's felt in a long, long time, thanks to you, Annabelle."

Her lids were starting to close. The softness of the bed, the comfort of having a strong man next to her was putting Annabelle in a trance. She didn't realize she had reached out her hand, placing it across the quilt until he took her hand in his.

Their fingers intertwined. As she drifted off to sleep, Annabelle felt like the luckiest girl alive. She could definitely get used to this life.

Chapter 4

A full house divided don't win no pots.
-unknown

Grant twisted and turned, sweat pouring from his brow. He knew the outlaws were gaining on him, but he kicked his mount with the tips of his boots, urging the tired horse on. If he could reach the edge of the woods, he would be able to dodge the bullets that were flying by his head until he once again had the upper hand.

The leg. The doc wanted to cut it off but he refused. Now, it was aching so bad, he had a hard time keeping himself upright on the horse and the outlaws were too close for his liking. Grant decided to turn and fight. There was no way to reach the woods now.

Before he was able to turn around, he felt the slick sound of a bulled whiz by and then one slice in to his back. He began to fall. He was so close to the edge of the trees. Grant reached out, trying to pull the trees closer, hoping for cover but it was too late. Another barrage of bullets hit him in the back. The sound stopped, he no longer felt the saddle underneath as he began to fall in utter darkness.

"Grant! Grant! Wake up, you are scaring me!" Her angelic voice pleaded. His back was against something hard, no longer curled in to the softness of his bed. She was hovering over top, those blue eyes worried as her long beautiful hair surrounded her face like a halo.

He reached up to push a strand back. "You are my angel," he told her, his husky voice still filled with sleep.

"Grant, please! You fell out of bed."

He looked around. There was an oil lamp on the dresser, it's brightness glowing, giving off a soft light around the room. He shook

himself. “I was dreaming.”

“You were thrashing around, I swear the bed bounced off the walls,” she told him, concerned. “Let’s get you back in bed.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot about the nightmares that happen now and again. I’ll go sleep in the other room.”

Annabelle stood. hands on her hips. “You will do no such thing. Now, Grant, stand up right now and get back in the bed.”

Her strict voice almost made him smile. Didn’t she realize how adorable she looked acting as if she was able to move mountains by speaking? Her insistence caused Grant to pull himself up, forcing his good leg to take all the weight. Once standing, his bad leg gave out. He tumbled on to the bed, a spasm shattering his whole body.

Annabelle came to life. As he writhed on his side of the bed, holding on to his leg, trying to stop the spasms, she pulled a tin from the day dress she had worn earlier and took off the lid.

A smell so wonderful hit his nostrils it stopped him for a second. Then the spasm continued on. Before he knew what was happening, she was unbuttoning his trousers, which he had left on to sleep in. Annabelle yanked at them, nudging them down until his thigh was exposed. “What are you doing?” he tried to ask between clenched teeth. The pain was almost too much this time.

Annabelle stood over him, dipping her hand in the small tin and rubbing something on her hands. All he could do was watch her between clenching his jaw at the pain. He was powerless to stop her or anyone at this point. It was why he had lost all confidence in himself. How was he ever going to take care of anyone when he couldn’t take care of his own self? This was a mistake to marry and bring someone else in on this catastrophe, even if he had no choice in the matter. Except, he had a choice. He simply should have refused to allow the preacher and his wife to force them to marry. Except, deep in his heart, he knew she was his angel from the moment he saw those caring blue eyes.

She rubbed the contents of the tin on her hands, then placed her palms on the throbbing muscle on his thigh.

Grant jumped. “Let me alone,” he forced out.

“Grant, it’s ok. I know what I’m doing.” She spoke to him in soothing tones as her fingers began to grind the salve deep in to his muscles. There was a minty menthol smell rising to his nostrils, almost as if the oil was not only soothing his muscles but his soul as well.

He began to relax. Each muscle in his whole body lightened as her voice penetrated his mind. Grant closed his eyes, listening to her soothing words, allowing her to take complete control of his senses.

The clenched muscles in his leg eased up. He felt her warm breath on his cheek before she gave him a soft kiss. His eyes fluttered open for a second.

His angel.

Those blue eyes.

He knew now what he didn’t know before.

Someone cared for him so much, she was losing sleep over a man like him. A cripple. He lifted a heavy hand to her cheek, staring in to those blue eyes. “Thank you,” he mouthed, knowing he didn’t have the energy to say it aloud.

She leaned her cheek in to his hand, closing her own eyes for a moment. When he drifted off, it was from the sound of her voice, her soothing tone telling him everything would be alright.

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The sweet smell of coffee permeated his nostrils. Even though the room was not quite as dark as in the dead of the night, the oil lamp was now cold. Sunrise was almost here. Grant made his way out of the big bed, noticing Annabelle had already left. He remembered her sweet face as he had drifted off to sleep.

All through the night she had been there, close by his side, making sure he was fine.

There was an empty cup sitting on the table, almost as if it had his name on the front. He smiled at the thought, picking it up to fill from the tin pot on the cook stove.

He heard the rocker moving back and forth before he went outside where his wife of one day was sitting, her eyes on the sun as it slowly

peeked above the horizon.

He stood beside her chair, placing a hand gently on her shoulder. “Thank you for the coffee,” he told her.

She nodded, still keeping her eyes on the sky. “I’ve never seen the sun rise quite like this before.”

“It’s beautiful,” he told her. He’d never taken the time to watch it himself, not caring if the sun ever rose again. Wallowing in his own self pity had been the low-light of his life. That was about to change. Grant wanted to give this woman everything and anything she wanted.

“I have to go in to town today to return the buggy to the boarding house. I was wondering if you’d like to come along to help me choose a horse? I’m going to need something to travel back and forth. Although a buggy would be much more practical.”

“No need. I have a wagon behind the barn. Didn’t use it much except to move wood or big items.”

She swung around. “You have a wagon? That’s perfect then. Can we get a horse for the wagon?”

Annabelle didn’t’ have a clue how much a horse cost. There was some things he’d have to teach her if she was to live out here on his farm. “Did you see the three horses in the barn yesterday?”

Annabelle nodded. “Why, yes, of course.”

“We have a horse for the wagon. I’ll tell you what. After breakfast, I’ll hitch up the wagon and follow you to town to drop off the buggy.”

“Can we take along some of your wooden shelves? It would be much better to show the proprietor we mean business if we had the actual product we plan to sell.”

Grant smiled. She was quite the sales person. “Whatever you want, Annabelle.” Her name slipped off his tongue so naturally, he smiled.

She gave him a look of utter joy. “May I choose the pieces?”

“Yes, Annabelle. Anything you want.”

She stood. “Well, then, let’s get breakfast started. Do you have any more eggs?”

“Over there.” He pointed to the small chicken pen he had set up months before. The circular wired fence kept them in one area. Grant

had constructed a make-shift gate so he could feed them inside the pen and collect the eggs in the wooden structure he had built.

“Perfect.” Grant watched in amusement as Annabelle marched over to the pen, pushing her way through the chickens as they pecked at her skirt. She took the tip of her boots to push them aside like an expert.

Leaning inside, Annabelle began to place eggs in her apron, taking enough to cook a hearty breakfast. As she walked back to the porch, Grant grinned. “I didn’t think you knew how to gather eggs.”

“There is a lot you will learn about me, Grant. In Chicago, we bought our eggs at the local shop but in Mill Ridge, I bought them from the doctor’s office.”

“The doctor’s office?”

She nodded. “Yes, each morning I collected eggs in his back yard. Doctor James accepts chickens as payment for those who can’t afford his cost. He doesn’t like the chickens at all, claims to hate eggs as well, so he offers them to the boarding house for half the price we’d pay at the mercantile.”

“It sounds like the doctor has been helping out those in need in many ways.”

“He is a good man, Grant. He’s also caring and wants the best for everyone, you included.”

“He didn’t help me none with this wound. Told me I needed to strengthen the muscle by doing some type of strange exercise. I shut him out at that point.”

Annabelle stood at the door, holding the eggs in her apron. “You have me now. I’ll take care of everything for you.” With those words, Annabelle disappeared in to the kitchen.

Grant’s leg didn’t hurt as he walked towards the back of the barn. Maybe she was right, with her here, she was keeping the pain from his wound at bay. She was an angel in disguise. Looking up, he nodded to a white, fluffy cloud. “Thank you. Maybe there is room in this life for a man like me after all.”

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Annabelle dropped off the buggy at the livery, walking the short block to the boarding house to let Caroline know the buggy was back where it belonged.

According to Grant, she would have full use of the wagon he followed her in. The size of it was a bit intimidating but he had told her it wasn't much different than driving the buggy. He had parked it in front of the mercantile, waiting patiently while she visited with Caroline.

"I'm so happy you have everything under control, Caroline."

"I wanted to thank you for helping me realize the color of my eyes don't really matter to folks much here. It's made a big difference."

Annabelle gave her a hug. "I hate to run off but I've got to take care of some business at the mercantile."

"The shop owner stopped by this morning on his way to open up. He said there was a telegram for you."

Annabelle hurried down the street, anxious to pick up the telegram. She knew it had to be from one of her brothers. They were the only two who knew where she was. Or, even cared. There was no one else. Her parents had no kin besides their three children. Grandma had passed a few years earlier, bestowing upon Annabelle all her knowledge of cooking and baking. At least she had that memory.

Grant stood beside the wagon, looking nervous. With the thought of a telegram she had almost forgot why they were visiting the mercantile. Taking a deep breath, she went to him. "Can you hand me the smaller shelf and bring along two more, please?"

Grant followed her in to the shop as the small bell tinkled upon their arrival. The proprietor was behind the counter, leaning over, holding a magnifying glass in front of him. The newspaper from Wichita Falls was spread out on the counter.

"Good morning to you, sir," Annabelle told him, keeping her voice merry.

He reluctantly straightened. "What can I do for you this morning, Mrs. Jennings." He squinted, eyeing her husband. "Mr. Jennings. What do you have there?"

Annabelle came forward. “Well, sir, we would like to offer you the very first chance to offer these in your place of business. Imagine the headlines when they read how the only way to purchase these beautiful shelves is through your store.”

He cocked a brow. “Let me see what you got there.” Annabelle held her breath as he studied each piece Grant presented him. Nodding, he spoke in low tones to her husband, cutting Annabelle completely from the conversation. At first, she felt affronted. But as she watched Grant’s eyes light up, bartering back and forth with the proprietor, she realized this was exactly what Grant needed. A sense of well being and satisfaction was in the air.

Before they left, she was anxious to get her telegram. “Is there a letter here for me?” she inquired.

“So it seems. Did you need me to read it to you?”

“Of course not!”

“It’s from Chicago.”

“I know. Thank you, sir. Have a good day.” Annabelle marched from the store, her husband not far behind. While she sat on the bench, he finished carrying the rest of the goods inside.

Annabelle stared at the telegram. Even though she was so excited to hear from her brother, a sense of foreboding came upon her. Neither one of the twin brothers had ever tried to contact her. She had written them on a regular basis, letting them know where she was at all times. They both had their own lives and it was enough to her they were happy.

For some reason, Annabelle sensed there was something terribly wrong.

“Are you hungry? You look a bit flushed,” Grant told her. “Why don’t we stop at the café across from the boarding house. I’ll treat you to some lunch.”

All Annabelle could do was nod. She clenched the telegram in her hand, quiet for the rest of the ride. When Grant pulled up in front of the café, he turned to her. At the look on her face, he didn’t say a word, but helped her from the wagon and kept a hand on her back as they found an empty table.

“Do you want to tell me what it says?” His voice was gentle, more so than she had ever heard. It was a calming effect for the storm she felt was about to explode upon her. Annabelle never had a great moment in her life. But she had turned things around, no matter how awful something was.

She had done it when her father died, taking care of a household and a woman who should have been taking care of her. Again, when her mother died, she made sure to send her brothers to school so they were able to make something of themselves. From losing their family home to become a mail order bride, one disaster after another had happened, and yet, she had overcame it all.

Even now, she knew her life was too good to be true. Taking care of Grant and watching him overcome his own personal demons gave her hope.

Now, she knew whatever was inside the telegram was about to rip all hope away.

“I’m not sure I can read this.” She held it out to him. “Would you mind?”

Perhaps if she didn’t see the words, she didn’t have to face whatever lie ahead.

“Are you certain?”

She nodded. “Go ahead.”

Grant ordered for them first, waiting until the server was gone before he opened the telegram. Annabelle watched his facial expression for a sign of something dreadful.

He looked up and grinned. “It appears your brother Jack is coming to visit. He says he has something for you and will explain everything when he gets here in two weeks. He says he is no longer practising medicine in Philadelphia and will wrap things up in a few days so if you would secure him a room somewhere he would appreciate the help.”

Annabelle let out a long, deep sigh. Her hand shook as she accepted the letter Grant gave back. “Thank you. Did it say anything about John?”

“I’m afraid not. Who is John?”

“His twin. Jackson and Johnathan are twins. They don’t do anything apart. When Jack was accepted at medical school, John had to go to the same school. But he dropped out when he was offered a job in a lucrative business in the city, close to his brother. I’m sure it is keeping him busy.”

Even as she spoke the words, a dark cloud engulfed Annabelle. The two boys would never part unless something dreadful happened. There must be something else going on, only she wished she knew what it was.

“Why are you concerned, Annabelle?”

“You are able to read me so well, Grant. We hardly know each other.”

He reached across the table to take her hand. “I feel as if I’ve known you forever.”

“How sweet of you, Grant. I’m starting to feel the same way.” She wanted to take the worry from his brow. “There is no need to worry, I suppose. Let’s make plans to build up your new business venture. It will keep us busy until my brother arrives.”

He squeezed her hand before letting go. When the waitress arrived, they ate heartily, deciding to take another drive to Wichita Falls the next morning. “We can always see if old Jim Wheeler will allow you to sell your shelves in his mercantile. I have another idea,” she told Grant. “Why not place an advertisement in the newspaper?”

“Excellent idea.”

The two finished their meal, throwing ideas back and forth. Soon, Annabelle’s worries about her brothers disappeared. She secured a room for him at the boarding house, making sure it was paid for ahead of time. It was the least she could do since he was travelling all this way. If she had more room at the ranch house, he would stay there. Perhaps it was something she’d mention to Grant soon. He was able to build on to the home, she was certain.

The next day they loaded up more shelves, a beautiful engraved jewellery box and small child’s rocker Grant had made. They made it a day, stopping to see Miss Addie while having lunch at Jenna’s café. The town of Wichita Falls was thriving, bringing many more women

westward. Annabelle looked around, knowing the women would buy up Grant's wooden items faster than he could supply them.

"We'd better stop in Mill Ridge on the way home to check the supply," Annabelle said.

"I doubt anyone bought them yet," Grant told her. "I know you think they are wonderful, but they are just simple shelves anyone can make."

"Grant Jennings, you are so wrong! You have a talent the world will know about someday. Wait and see."

When they left Mill Ridge later that evening, she was smiling away. "I told you so."

"Humph."

Annabelle let out a deep sigh. "Every single item sold in one day. One day, Grant. I am holding in my hand custom orders for bigger and more expensive items. What, pray tell, do yo have to say now?"

Grant turned to her. He guided the horse to the farm, then stopped when they reached the front porch. He moved so quickly Annabelle yelped when he took her around the waist and picked her up, spinning her in the air.

She shouted out loud as he held her in his arms. "Stop, Grant. I don't want you to hurt-"

His arms were still around her waist, her feet still dangling in the air as he covered her mouth with his own. It was a much more ardent kiss than the one on their wedding day, knocking Annabelle for a loop.

"I feel dizzy," she mentioned when he finally set her down.

He pulled her closer, his arms wrapped around her. "Then stay in my arms, darling. I'm not sure what else to say, except this has been one heck of a day."

"Are you going to kiss me again?" she inquired, her mouth already moving towards his.

"Anything you want, sweet Annabelle."

She touched his mouth with her own, then moved away, smiling. "I'm ready to become your wife, not only in name," she whispered, as if someone were standing around the corner listening.

He dipped his head and kissed her again, taking her by the hand. “Your wish is my command,” he said, closing the door to the outside world behind.

Chapter 5

You can't keep trouble from visitin, but you don't have to offer it a chair. -unknown

*F*or almost two weeks, Annabelle worked hard all day long to keep things moving along. Grant spent most of his day in the barn, working on the new orders. After the Wichita Falls advertisement, he was barely able to keep up.

"I'm going to run over to Elizabeth's for a spell. I'll be home around lunch time." Annabelle had an idea. There was no way Grant was able to keep up with all the orders by himself. She would inquire if William, Elizabeth's oldest adopted son, would like a job. He was learning how to be a ranch hand but the last time she spoke with his mother, he wasn't allowed to do much while he was in school. Which made for a young man who needed something to keep him busy. Elizabeth was determined he would get a good education, much to Noah's dismay.

William had been kidnapped by his own father, a wanted outlaw who had also tried to harm Elizabeth. When Noah came to their rescue, it had changed their lives. William had shot his own father when the horrible man had tried to kill Elizabeth. William had been troubled ever since, going off alone for hours at a time. Elizabeth was worried about him. Maybe the chance to be creative will bring him back.

At least Annabelle would like to think it could help. She knocked on the door, excited to find out.

Elizabeth waddled through the kitchen, smiling and giving her friend a hug. "I'm so glad to see you. How nice we are neighbors. I've

missed a woman's voice. Please, sit and have some tea."

"I can't stay long, I've got to get back and keep things moving along."

After pouring a cup of tea for the two of them, Elizabeth rubbed her protruding belly. "It's getting harder to get my work done. I can't wait until this baby gets here. Most days I want to sit on the porch and rest."

Annabelle smiled. "You can rest if you'd like. Who is going to tell you that you can't?" She knew Elizabeth's husband catered to his wife, hiring one of the girls from Miss Addie's to come out once a week to help with the laundry and cleaning.

"No one. There's so much work here. We finished building the barn and bunk house, and Noah hired three more rangers. Soon, we'll have a big working ranch. It's coming along, Annabelle. I am so happy."

"I'm glad. Grant is keeping busy, too. His woodworking is taking both Mill Ridge and Wichita Falls by storm. I am so happy. I've even thought about hiring someone to take photographs of the furniture and design a catalog. I'm afraid he is getting exhausted trying to carry all the work himself."

Elizabeth nodded. "I know just the solution but I'm betting you already know what I am going to say. William?"

She nodded. "He came over yesterday to see if Grant needed any help but Grant was not agreeable. I'd like to hire him when he isn't working on the ranch here. Do you think he'd like to learn woodworking?"

"I think he would," a voice came from the other room. Annabelle and Elizabeth laughed when William stepped in the kitchen, agreeing to help Grant.

"I'll pay you five dollars a week if you help him each day. Choose five days on and two days off."

"That's mighty kind of you, Annabelle. Are you able to afford to pay him?"

"The woodworking is making us a small fortune. Our profit will grow larger when he realizes he can get things done much faster with help. William, stop over tomorrow and we'll go see Grant together."

The next day Grant eyed the boy warily but agreed when Annabelle gave him her best smile. She was positive he would do anything for her. Turns out she was right.

She went to her husband and gave him a hug. He leaned in, whispering for her ears only. “You are trying to trick me, sweet wife.”

She looked at him and laughed. “I adore you, Grant.”

His look as he gazed in to her own unsettled her. This was too good to be true. When was the sky going to come down and topple on her?

“I adore you, Annabelle.”

“I believe a hot apple pie is in order for dessert. William, would you care to stay for dinner?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled at the two but they were now busy with heads together as Grant showed William around the barn. Annabelle left, working her way to where a tree stood brimming with apples waiting to be picked. She commenced to pull some fruit from the lower branches. Gathering them in her apron, she ran back to the house to begin supper.

Tonight, they would enjoy hot apple pie along with their ham dinner. She touched the telegram still in her pocket. Her brother would be here tomorrow, bringing news she was not going to like. The feeling was so strong she pulled the telegram out of her pocket and threw it in the cook stove. Slamming the door shut, she gasped.

What in the world had gotten in to her? She was happy now. Annabelle had a husband who was coming along nicely. He went all day long without complaining or grasping at his leg. She made sure he rested it each night. In the late evening, she’d take ointment from the tin and massage it on his thigh, putting him right to sleep. Annabelle doubted he had a nightmare since the night she started.

He adored her and they were building a life together. Why was she so afraid of her brother’s visit?

Squaring her shoulders, Annabelle decided to make the best of tonight. She began to peel the potatoes, using her pent up frustration to cook the best meal ever.

She worked relentlessly for hours, presenting a meal fit for a king. Or, rather for all of the king’s palace. Dish after dish was placed on

the table. Annabelle realized she had done too much.

When Grant entered the kitchen with William in tow, he stopped short. “Annabelle, are we expecting more company?”

She shook her head, pushed her shoulders back and smiled. “Of course not. I was hoping for some leftovers so all I have to do is warm them up when my brother arrives tomorrow. You don’t plan to eat it all tonight, do you?”

William giggled, then coughed before turning his head away.

Grant gave her a look of empathy, realizing she was nervous about her brother’s arrival. He gathered her in his arms, placing a kiss on her forehead. “It will be fine, Annabelle. I’m going with you to the train station.”

She snuggled against his chest, taking a moment to catch her breath. He was right, everything would be fine as long as he was by her side. Was this love? She hadn’t planned to fall in love with Grant so quickly.

“Will you have the time to take me to Wichita Falls? I can ride in myself, you know.”

“Nonsense, William has promised to finish the shelves first thing in the morning after his school lessons and I’ll accompany you.” He leaned in to her again, his mouth close to hers. “I’d never let you do this alone, dear wife.”

“I,” she caught herself before saying the words, deciding it wasn’t time yet.

Grant watched her closely. “You, what, Annabelle? Is there something you want to tell me?”

“I want to thank you for going with me tomorrow.” Her words sounded weak, even to her own ears. There was no way she’d fallen in love yet, was there? Impossible.

He gazed at her, as if he knew what she wanted to say. Grant turned to the young man in their presence. “William, please sit down and eat. I hope you are hungry.”

Annabelle laughed. “And, we have an apple pie for desert.”

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Annabelle stood nervously at the train depot, clinging on to Grant's hand for dear life. She stared at the empty tracks until she felt her husband shift his leg. "I'm sorry, shall we sit on the bench over there?"

Grant didn't argue, which meant his leg was bothering him. Last night, after a full meal with William and Grant, she had cleaned up the dishes and sat beside him on the bench outside while William rode home before dark. After watching the sun set, her eyes must've closed because she woke up in bed this morning at first light.

Grant's regimen usually consisted of having his daily soak and afterwards she would massage oil in to his thigh. But, last night she had fallen asleep. He never woke her up so she knew he was most likely in pain today. She had also started working his leg, making him stretch the leg certain ways like Doctor James had explained to her.

Grant would only do the exercises with her. Each morning they woke up, she would make him do his exercises then he would begin to tickle her until she laughed so hard it brought tears to her eyes. This morning she had overslept so they had both jumped out of bed and rushed through breakfast to get here on time.

Now, here they are, waiting on a train that is obviously late. The lonely tracks stretched out for miles, fading in to the flat landscape. Annabelle bit her bottom lip, stretching her neck to make sure not to miss the first glimpse of the train when it came in to sight.

Grant stiffened, his hand moving towards his thigh. "Are you getting muscle spasms, Grant?" Annabelle asked, worried he was doing too much.

"I'm fine, Annabelle. It's a bit painful but nothing I can't handle. Your loving touch has done wonders for my crippled leg."

"Grant Jennings, you are no more a cripple than I am! Haven't you proven it to yourself already?"

"Guess you're right."

"I will be fine here if you want to go back to the farm and rest your leg. I didn't mean to drag you here if you are not feeling well."

He laid a hand over hers. "I assure you, I am fine my sweet wife.

I'm not leaving your side."

She hung her head. "I do appreciate it, Grant. There is something Jack is not telling me. I feel it inside."

"Don't go sporting trouble yet, Annabelle. Wait and see why he's here."

A low whistle sounded in the distance. Annabelle closed her eyes. "He's coming," she told Grant, squeezing his hand. She rose, clutching on to her husband, not aware of how she dug her fingers in to his flesh.

Grant stood with her while the tracks shook like nobody's business. As the train made its slow descend in to the depot, her heart began to hammer. It was going to be a wonderful reunion. She hadn't seen her younger brother in five long years.

He was the first one off the train. Her brother had grown so tall, his light sandy hair well groomed. It had been a few years since she saw a young teenager go off to medical school and now he came back a man.

He held a dark brown doctor's bag in his hand as if he were going to the office. Annabelle jumped up and down, letting Grant's hand go and began to run towards her brother, all thoughts of bad things forgotten.

"Jackson!"

He looked up with a sad, bitter-sweet smile. Annabelle stopped dead in her tracks, about two feet from her brother. She had wanted to take him in her arms, give him the biggest hug ever but when she saw the sadness in his eyes, she knew.

A hand flew over her mouth before she cried out. She stood frozen in the middle of the train depot knowing this was the sky falling out. Her brother Johnathan, Jackson's twin, was dead.

Annabelle crumpled to the ground, the tears no longer able to stop. She held her hands over her face, crying in to them. *Why! God, why! He was so young, he had a full life ahead!* Cries became gasps as her brother kneeled down, taking her tear-stained hands in his, the warmth of his fingers trying to flow in to her cold ones.

"I'm so sorry, Belle," her brother murmured. He began to rock her

back and forth, her agonizing cries blocked out by the sound of the train's whistle blowing to warn passengers the train was about to leave the station.

"Show's over, folks, go home!"

Annabelle felt herself being lifted in the air. She was in Grant's arms now, but her tears continued to flow. This was the last straw, the one thing she wasn't able to stay strong for. Her brother was gone, his life snuffed out before he had a chance to live.

Was it her fault? What had she done by sending him to medical school so far away. Perhaps if she hadn't pushed them so hard, he would still be alive.

There was no one else to blame for his death but herself. Someone handed her a handkerchief and she cried in to it, letting herself be placed in the back of the wagon. Her brother sat beside her now as she leaned against his shoulder. Annabelle opened her eyes to see Grant driving the wagon out of town while folks stood and stared.

She had to know the truth. "What happened to Johnathan?"

Her brother tightened his arm around her shoulder. "You've been a great older sister, Belle, and I'm sorry I had to bear this burden on you. It's why I wanted to come here to tell you myself. I can't imagine life without John. Philadelphia no longer appeals to me. Half of my heart is now gone."

"I should be consoling you, not the other way around."

"Let me take care of you for once in my life, 'Belle. You raised us up from the time Pa passed on. Mother wasn't any help and we both know this."

"How did he die?" He kept avoiding her question.

"Can we talk about it later?"

"No, Jack, I want to know." There was something he wasn't saying.

Jack leaned his head back, staring at the sky. He closed his eyes. "You have a right to know, I'm sorry. John dropped out of medical school because he found a way to make lots of money. He told you he found a good, decent job but he went to work for a man with a shady background. I'm afraid it's what got him killed."

Annabelle sat up. "What do you mean, it got him killed? Dear God,

Jackson, what did he do?"

Grant stopped the wagon along the trail. "We'll take a break here. I want to hear what you have to say."

Jack nodded. "I'm afraid John was making his own shady deals, taking business away from his employer."

Grant grumbled. "When the employer found out, he wanted John out of the way?"

Jack stared at Grant, surprised he knew. "Yes, that's exactly what happened."

Annabelle patted her brother's hand. "Don't look shocked, Jack, my husband was a Texas Ranger."

Jack actually looked relieved. "That's good to know because Don Thomas has threatened all of us unless we pay back the money John took from his business. John told the man before he died he sent the money to someone out west. Since you were the only person we know out west, I assumed he sent it to you."

"I never received anything from him, Jack. It can take a long time to get mail though."

"It's why you are here, to protect your sister, isn't it?" Grant's voice rose as Annabelle took all of this in.

Her brother nodded, his cheek's crimson. "I'm ashamed of what my brother has done but I won't let anyone hurt her. I've been called to help people, not hurt them but if this man gets close to my sister, I will shoot him dead!"

Grant swore. "Do you realize by coming here you have put her in more danger? He is most likely having you tracked." He jumped back up on the wooden bench, grabbing the reins to keep moving along.

"It's okay, Jack. Grant can protect us, he is skilled in these kinds of things."

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Grant chewed at the inside of his jaw. Her last words hit him hard. He never, ever wanted to wear his Texas Ranger badge again, skilled or not. But when it came to his wife and her family, he'd die first

before he let any harm come to her.

His leg began to ache. He had to learn to stop depending on Annabelle to rub ointment in to his leg every single night. He was able to do so himself and he probably should've last night after she fell asleep. But, he liked when she did. He'd put up with some pain now and again waiting on her gentle hands.

Don Thomas was known in the city of Philadelphia for his crooked ways. He didn't get his money honestly. The law had been trying to put him in jail for a few years now, except they never were able to pinpoint any wrong doings. Grant remembered reading about him time and time again in the newspaper.

The man needed to get caught in the act. Grant had a choice to make. This man was relentless, he would stop at nothing if he felt someone wronged him. Apparently, her brother did and the criminal wanted Jack and Annabelle to pay.

That left Grant with hardly a choice. Now that Jack drew a long line directly to Annabelle, he'd have to step in and take matters in his own hands. He was no fool in believing this would all go away. Sooner or later, there would be a few men riding in to town and they would stumble upon his farm, guns drawn and force Annabelle to surrender all her money. Then they would leave no witnesses.

Under Grant's watch, he would never let this happen. It was time to draw the bad guys out.

Grant passed his farm and headed towards Noah's place. His old partner needed to be aware of what was about to take place. Out here in the west they took care of each other. Even though he was about to become a father, Grant had no doubt Noah would stand by him. It was the ranger blood that still ran through no matter how long they were retired.

Chapter 6

You don't learn much when everything goes right. -unknown

*"E*lizabeth, thank you for the tea." She sipped the warm liquid, hoping it would stay down. Her stomach was queasy and her heart was torn in two.

"I'm sorry about your brother, dear. What can I do to help?"

Annabelle looked at her dear friend through tear stained eyes. "There is nothing anyone can do. He is gone and it's my fault. I never should have sent him to medical school."

"Don't blame yourself. According to your story he wanted to go. You said so yourself."

Annabelle smiled through her tears. "I know this. He would not go anywhere without his twin. Where did I go wrong, though? What happened that he quit school and went to work for such a horrible man?"

"Annabelle, don't plague yourself so. It isn't anyone's fault but your brothers, I'm sorry to say. Some people turn bad even if they are good at one point. It's no one's fault, you can't blame yourself."

"I do blame myself. He was my responsibility. I worked so hard to make sure he got a good education and went to medical school. I swore he would have a better life then our parents and now look!" Relentless tears rolled down her cheeks again.

Elizabeth sat with her on the settee, trying to give comfort while she cried her heart out. Would the tears ever stop? She almost felt as if her own child had died, even though it was her brother. "I need to stop and get a grip on myself," she mumbled.

Elizabeth shook her head and patted Annabelle's shoulder. "Now,

now, you can cry as much as you need to. But at some point you are right, the tears will have to stop and you will have to move on. I'm sorry he is gone, but you are alive and we can't stop living now, can we?"

"Thank you, Elizabeth. I needed to hear those words." She let out the air from her lungs, pulled herself up and squared her shoulders. "I better go find Grant. There's supper to fix and chores to do at home."

"Good for you, Annabelle. And please don't hesitate to come visit if you need someone to talk to. I'm always here for you."

She gave Elizabeth a hug. "I hope I haven't been a burden. You have your own issues right now."

Elizabeth laughed. "Not issues, I'm having a baby. Now, let's go find our husbands. They went outside to talk."

The moment the front door opened and Annabelle stepped on to the porch, Grant was right there beside her. She looked around, wondering how he got here so fast. Had he been waiting all this time?

"I'm ready to leave," she told him.

When they loaded up the wagon, Annabelle sat on the front bench while Jack hopped in the back. Two men on horses followed behind. She turned to Grant, who had a serious, stoic look on his face. "Who are those men?"

"They are Noah's hired hands. They will be staying at our farm for awhile. It's good you made all that food yesterday." He tried to smile, but she noticed the worry lines across his brow.

Annabelle hadn't known him when he was a Texas Ranger, but she imagined he was as serious then as he was now while upholding the law. "We have no room to put them."

Grant turned his head and stared. "They won't be doing much sleeping. I'll make space in the barn where they can take turns resting."

Annabelle was getting worried now. "Do you think John's murderers will come here?"

Grant sighed. "Annabelle, I don't want you to worry your pretty head, that's my job. In the meantime, I do want you to be aware of your surroundings at all times. We will go about our business as usual

but if you see anything out of the ordinary, I want to know."

She nodded. "You didn't answer my question. I need a gun."

Grant sighed. "I can keep you safe, Annabelle."

She looked at him, a low anger burning from the bottom of her stomach. "Someone murdered my brother. This same person may come here and try to harm me or even you. I won't be caught off guard."

"Well, then, I will make sure you have a gun."

When they returned to the farm it was soon time to start supper. Annabelle stoked up the stove, warming some of last night's leftovers. She wasn't up to cooking, as her body and mind were exhausted from the news of her brother's death.

Setting all the food on the table, Annabelle went to the porch to ring the bell. In less than a minute, her brother and husband strode from the barn. Annabelle noticed one of the men from Noah's ranch was positioned about a half mile down the road, near a grove of trees. She wasn't sure where the other went.

After they ate, Jack fixed up two extra plates for Noah's men. "I'm going to take them some food," he told the two. "Then I'll be heading back to Mill Ridge to the boarding house."

Annabelle was startled. "But, why? You can't leave, you'll be a target and all alone there. What if -"

Grant placed a hand over hers. "He'll be fine. No one is going to travel any more tonight." Her husband turned to Jack. "Make sure you get my telegram off as soon as you get settled in at the boarding house."

Jack nodded and left.

Annabelle was beside herself. "Grant, you can't possibly allow Jack to go there by himself? I can't lose him, too!" She stood to go after him but Grant stopped and pulled her back. He wrapped strong arms around her.

"Annabelle, stop. Please. Jack will be fine. I'm sending one of Grant's men with him. He will be safe, I promise. There are no trains coming in from Wichita Falls until tomorrow afternoon so he'll be safe tonight. No one will travel at night, especially anyone from the city

who doesn't know the territory. Besides, I need Jack to send a telegram tonight for me."

"The mercantile is closed by now."

"Texas Rangers work all hours of the day and night. There are ways to do things, Annabelle."

"Like disturbing the proprietor of the mercantile during closing hours?"

"Something like that."

It felt good in his arms. Annabelle knew without a doubt she was safe when he was here, taking charge of everything. "You're pretty confident about this whole ordeal, Grant."

"I've dealt with worse."

She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him. "If you are planning on putting your badge back on, there's a hard rule in this household."

He nuzzled her cheek. "Oh, and what, pray tell, is this rule you speak of?"

Annabelle backed away, taking his hands and walking backwards towards the door of the bedroom. "The rule is to keep my ranger in tip-top shape. I do believe it is time for your ointment and therapy for your leg."

He followed along like a long, lost puppy. "Yeah?"

"Yes. Follow me, Ranger."

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Annabelle awoke sometime in the night. The big bed was too empty, she realized, feeling around for the warmth of Grant's body. He was gone. She sat up, staring at the clear sky through the window. Stars sparkled bright, giving off enough light she could see to move towards the door, wanting to make sure he wasn't having issues with his leg.

When she opened the front door, her husband was on the rocker, it's slow movement steadily rocking him back and forth. Annabelle stood there for some time, watching his profile as he stared at the

night sky.

"You can come on out," he told her.

She closed the door behind her, slipping on to his lap. Annabelle pulled her feet up, resting in his arms. She snuggled in to his warmth. "Are you in pain?"

He shook his head and even though she didn't see it since her eyes were closed, she felt the movement. A sigh lifted her chest up and down, a sign of sheer contentment.

They stayed on the rocker for over an hour, not saying a word. Annabelle didn't realize she almost fell asleep in his arms until he gently nudged her. "I'm fine right here," she whispered when he tried to get her to go back to bed.

He went back to rocking then, humming an old cowboy tune. Annabelle woke off and on, listening to his voice as it soothed her soul. This world she lived in, it was her whole life now. A murderer would not dare try to take it away, which made Annabelle more determined to do something about it. In the morning, she wanted a gun to keep by her side.

Even though she knew Grant would protect her with all his being, she wasn't about to stick by his side every moment of the day. He had to work in the barn on his woodworking and take care of the farm. She needed to cook and clean and she didn't want him underfoot while she did chores.

No, they were not about to let this threat change their lives. She shifted in her husband's arms to speak to him. "Do you think it is safe to go to town tomorrow to spend time with Jack?"

"We're going to have plenty to do to keep busy in the next few days, so, we'll see. Besides, Jack will be here sometime during the daylight hours." Grant's sleepy voice lulled Annabelle to close her eyes again.

"I love being in your arms," she whispered as the rocking chair stilled. His steady breathing made her think he was asleep now.

"I love you," he said, plain as day. She felt his lips on her hair as they gently brushed across the top. Annabelle smiled to herself as she drifted off to sleep, hearing those beautiful words over and over again

in her mind.

Annabelle woke up back in her bed. Grant had carried her back to bed after they spent time on the porch together. She jumped up, realizing when the sun shone brightly through her window how late it must be. Pouring water from the pitcher to the basin, she washed up and changed, hurrying out the door to get eggs for breakfast.

Shooing the chickens away from her feet, Annabelle was bent over the coop gathering eggs when she heard a lot of hooves hitting the ground. It sounded like an army of riders approaching.

Quickly scooping eggs in her apron, she closed the gate and made her way towards the lane. A dozen or more riders on some of the largest horses she'd ever seen were stopped out front where Noah's man was standing guard by the grove of trees.

Annabelle panicked. One man wasn't able to take on all those men! She ran for the house, placing the eggs in a bowl by the stove. Annabelle pushed a chair over to where there was a rifle hanging on the wall above the door. Grant was able to reach it but she had to stand on the chair. Taking it down, Annabelle had no idea what to do.

She pushed the chair aside and marched outside, the rifle cocked under one arm and pointing it at the group of men. Leaving the porch, she hoped like high heaven she didn't have a need to use the gun, because she didn't even know if it was loaded.

Although she was sure Grant would keep it loaded. He was once a Texas Ranger, always at the ready. Her confidence wavered the closer she got to the crowd. Who were these men and what did they want? She hoped and prayed they were not the ones responsible for her brother's death. God only knew what she would do then.

They were a rough looking crowd. One man, who was in the lead, wore a dark patch over one eye. He stared at her rifle, an angry look on his face.

Even so, she had to stand firm. Looking back and forth she was desperate to find her husband. Where had he gone?

"Put down that fine rifle, young lady. We are not here to harm one little hair on that pretty head of yours."

The man with the patch was the one doing all the talking so she

directed her gun and herself towards him. “State your business.”

He laughed. *Laughed!* How in the world would she ever show anyone she was serious if a man laughed at her while sporting a gun?

She shoved the rifle in his direction, stepping a tiny bit closer. “I said to state your business, mister!”

The man pulled back on the reins, settling his restless horse. He looked up when he spotted a rider in the distance. Annabelle followed his gaze, relief flooding through her whole trembling body when she saw Grant and Noah riding towards them.

The men stopped short of the dozen riders. Grant smiled. “Captain.”

The man with the patch nodded. “Grant. You better teach your misses how to use a gun. Her aim is good but it won’t make a difference if there ain’t no bullets in there.”

Annabelle’s cheek burned the color of crimson. She turned to Grant who had slid from his horse and walked toward her. “Annabelle, meet Captain Randall. One of the meanest, most annoying Texas Rangers ever to grace this earth.”

Grant removed her fingers from the barrel of the gun. She was relieved to have it out of her hands. Annabelle swiped her hands together and walked up to the ranger. “Nice to meet you, sir. I’m sorry about the gun but we’re having some trouble here.”

“So, I hear. No worries, ma’am, this lot of misfits behind me will get the job at hand done. Between them and your husband and Noah, this shouldn’t take much time at all.”

Annabelle nodded with relief. “I appreciate your help. Thank you for coming. Now, if you will excuse me, I’m sure everyone is hungry.”

“That’s a fact, Mrs. Jennings. We got the telegram late last night and been riding ever since.”

“Well, then, I best get started.” There was one thing Annabelle knew how to do and that was cook for a crowd. It didn’t take her long to gather even more eggs and whip up a delightful breakfast of eggs, pancakes and delicious warm rolls from the oven. She whipped up some butter and placed everything on the table.

Satisfied there was plenty for everyone, Annabelle went outside to ring the bell. Most of the men had left their horses grazing in the field

while two or three riders had spread out across the countryside. She supposed those men were on guard.

When she rang the bell, her husband waved to let her know he was aware breakfast was ready. She wondered how this would all end. Her brother Jack was in Mill Ridge with only one other man to protect him. Why was Grant allowing him to stay there when the murderer may very well be in town as they speak? It didn't make sense. Annabelle needed to speak to him as soon as breakfast was over.

Except she never got the chance. After quickly gulping down his plate of food, Grant hurried outside while most of the men sat or stood on the porch eating breakfast. Spoons and forks scraped across their plates while some men talked with food in their mouths. Annabelle didn't have a chance to speak at all.

She turned to begin the job of cleaning the kitchen. It was quite the mess, but it didn't matter, it would keep her busy most of the morning and her mind from evil thoughts.

"Come on out here, Misses Jennings," the man with the patch told her later that morning.

She wiped her hands, curious to know what they wanted. In the front lawn, someone had set up an odd assortment of wooden spikes on the ground. Scattered on the porch were some of the men, leaning against the post or sitting with their backs against the house. A few men stood in a small crowd talking, not paying attention. Grant grinned when she came outside.

"What can I do for you?" she asked Captain Randall.

"This here is your first shooting lesson. See those wooden pieces sticking up from the ground."

"I do."

"You want to take this rifle and aim right there," he said, pointing. "Now, I'm going to hand you this rifle but you don't point it at no one, only at that spot. Got it?"

She nodded, becoming more nervous when everyone ceased talking and turned to watch.

Grant stepped alongside of her. "You can do it, Annabelle. Squeeze the trigger when you are ready, almost like you are kneading dough.

Don't pull hard, be gentle but firm."

Annabelle took a deep breath and squeezed the trigger the same time she closed her eyes. The barrel moved to point straight up in the air but Grant got a hold of it before she pointed it at someone.

"You stay in control of this gun, ok?"

"It's a bit scary."

"It is at first. Look, you hit the target."

Annabelle smiled when she saw the piece of wood in bits and pieces.

"Again."

She pointed the barrel at the one next in line. This time she was going to keep her eyes trained on the wood.

Grant's soothing speech calmed her fears. "Steady, aim and fire."

She was reassured by his words. She squeezed gently, forcing her eyes to watch the wood target. The gun didn't jerk this time. Her aim was true once again and the others yelled out in praise when the wooden spike was shattered.

"Good job. Again."

Her arm was starting to ache but Annabelle kept it up. If she were going to be the gun-toting wife of a Texas Ranger, she'd have to toughen her skills the best she knew how.

After shooting every single wooden spike, the crowd clapped and cheered. "You got yourself a good woman there, Grant."

"Ain't no one gonna mess with her, she's a crack shot."

Annabelle smiled and waved the men away. She knew they were trying to encourage her. If the truth be told, her skills were shoddy at best. It was only because of Grant's reassurance that kept her going, giving her the confidence she needed to pull the trigger.

Grant gave her a hug. "I'll be busy most of the day. Woodworking is going to come to a stand still until we lure Thomas here." At his words, he instantly clammed up, realizing too late he had given her more information than he wanted to.

"Lure them here? Grant? What are you saying?"

"It's why these men are here, Annabelle. We can't go days and months wondering when Thomas and his men will arrive. I can't place

you in that kind of danger. If my back is turned, he could sneak up here and that'd be the end. It's not going to happen."

"Maybe they will never show up. Grant, what does this mean for Jack? He's in town all by himself? I need to go to him."

"No, Annabelle. Jack is in town because he volunteered to be there. He has to do this for his brother."

"Do what? He's a sitting duck! Oh, my lands! Jack is going to be the lure? How could you let him do this?"

Annabelle was in shock. How dare her husband put her one and only brother in so much danger? Even if there were a hundred men, how dare he use Jack?

Grant took her by the arm and led her back inside, away from the others. "I can clearly see you are upset and I'm sorry my words slipped. I promised Jack you wouldn't find out and now you have. The honest truth is Jack believes he was followed here. There was a man who got off the train the same time he did who is also staying at the boarding house in Mill Ridge. He was most likely sent as a spy to find out all he can before the others show up."

Her heart hammered. "My brother is in dire danger."

"In another hour, most of the men here will be scattered all over Mill Ridge and Wichita Falls, waiting on the others to show up. I wired Captain Randall last night, knowing he and his men were close by. We have it all worked out and I don't want you to worry."

She turned away. "How can I not worry, Grant? He is like a sitting duck. You didn't stop him. If anything happens to him-"

"Annabelle, I'm sorry. Jack wanted to help."

She didn't dare look him in the eye. "Please, Grant, go on out to those men. I can't possibly speak about this any longer."

When Grant stood behind her for another moment, she walked away, ignoring his outstretched hand. When the door closed behind him, she collapsed on one of the wooden chairs.

Chapter 7

Good judgement comes from experience, and a lotta that comes from bad judgement. -unknown

Grant swore. He stood on the porch watching the men prepare to set their plan to motion. He needed to clear his head. Annabelle was upset with him, hell, she'd blame him if anything happened to Jack.

He set out more wooden spikes from the pile in a row, pulling the pistol from it's leather hanging low on his hip and blasting each spike in to the air, shattering the wood in tiny little pieces.

A few of the men were startled by his target practice, drawing guns before finding out what the commotion was all about. Grant looked up to see the men put their weapons down when realizing it was him. "Sorry," he mumbled, still angry at having a disagreement with his wife.

The captain didn't hesitate to lecture Grant. "Ain't no point in going off half-cocked, son. We have too much work to do. I need you on your toes today."

"Understood," Grant told him. "It's why I did this. Had to get her out of my head. Annabelle is upset with me, blames me because Jack wanted to go back to town. She fears he is in grave danger."

"He is, especially when he sits there like a guinea pig, waiting for someone to make a move. He may very well get caught in the middle of a gun fight. I think we need to move things along, shake things up a bit."

Grant turned towards his mentor. "Don't you think I know this? Jack insisted on this. He felt it was his duty to do so. They killed his

twin, he wants some type of justice."

"I understand his reasoning, but he is a civilian, not trained to fight. Now we'll have to make sure he isn't in the line of fire while we are trying to bring these criminals to justice. Just makes it harder, that's all."

Grant nodded. "I know. Jack is a doctor, trained to save lives. Not sure how this will all turn out." His heart was heavy today, knowing that Don Thomas was most likely on his way to settle a score. The Texas Rangers would stop him, he had no doubt.

"It's time to take a trip to town," the Captain told him. "It would probably be best if you and Noah ride in, no one will become suspicious. Check on the doctor and report back here in five hours. I'll have some men along the trail and on the outskirts if they are needed."

Grant knew he had better get moving. The Captain didn't mess around. If they weren't back in five hours on the dot, he'd come storming in to Mill Ridge with the rest of the men. Randall was a force to be reckoned with.

Grant decided to try to explain to Annabelle one more time. He didn't want to leave without at least trying. He knew too well going in to a battle meant sometimes a man didn't make it home. Grant wanted her to know how he felt about her. Making his way across the yard, he reached the porch when she opened the door and stood there, blocking his path.

"Can we go inside and talk?" he asked.

"What for? I believe we said everything we needed to say, don't you?"

Her beautiful blue eyes, the color of the western sky, bore in to his own, their sadness overwhelming. She was angry and hurt but he didn't want to leave her this way.

He didn't care who listened in so he said the most compelling three words in front of God and a whole dozen Texas Rangers. She needed to know. "I love you."

There was an eerie moment of silence before the first tear fell. He watched it trickle down her cheek. Grant reached out to wipe it away.

She opened the door wide for him to enter.

Grant closed the door behind him. Annabelle stood there in front of him, her tears falling softly on her cheeks. He gathered her in his arms as she wrapped her own around his neck.

“Oh, Grant,” she whispered for his ears only. “I love you, too.”

Grant’s heart pounded against his chest. He looked upward, nodding as if he and God were having an intimate conversation. It was silly, he knew, but there was no way she was willing to forgive him without some divine intervention from the man upstairs and he knew this. The anger that had sparked in her eyes earlier was too much for a woman to up and forgive just like that.

“Annabelle, before we met, I was lost. I didn’t care if I lived or died, until you came in to my life. You’ve redeemed me. I don’t want to ride out of here with you angry and hurt.”

“I’m so sorry, Grant. While I was cleaning up in here, I realized Jack has a mind of his own. He is as stubborn as the day is long and of course, he’d want to be the one to bring John’s murderer to justice. I’m sorry I blamed you. It isn’t your fault. I was coming outside to tell you so when you interrupted me with those meaningful, beautiful words.”

He cupped her cheeks in his hands, forcing those blue eyes to look at him. He wanted her to see how much he adored her. “My Annabelle, if it is the last thing I do, it will be to make you the happiest woman on the earth.”

His lips found hers in a sweet, loving kiss until they were disturbed by a harsh pounding on the door. “Times a wasting, Ranger. Time to ride.”

They both sighed at the same time. Grant didn’t want to leave her but he had work to do. It was time to saddle up. “I meant what I said, Annabelle, I do love you.”

She took his hands in hers and held them to her cheek. “I know, I heard you last night on the porch.”

He grinned. “Why didn’t you say something then?”

She smiled, kissing his knuckles and taking a step back. “I was in shock, wondering what a man as fine as you could possibly see in a

woman like me."

Grant lifted her up by the waist and planted a quick, spontaneous kiss on her mouth. "When this is over, I'll not only tell you, darling, I'll show you why I do."

"Promise?"

"I promise and I never, ever go back on my word."

"Hurry home, Grant."

Those sweet words were embedded in his mind the whole way to Mill Ridge. He finally had someone to come home to. A purpose in life instead of an empty farm with nothing or no one to live for. When he first built the farm house, it was nice to know after all the years wandering the country as a Texas Ranger, he'd finally have a spot to call home. But after awhile, the purpose was lost. He had no one to enjoy it with. No one wanted to spend their life with a cripple.

Until Annabelle.

Annabelle made him feel like the tallest man in the world. She didn't care if he had a limp. Most days the pain no longer affected him like before. It was because of her gentle touch. He had noticed his limp was not always present these days. She had done wonders for him.

Because she loved a man no one thought could be redeemed. A smile played across his face as they stopped in front of the saloon in town. Noah and Grant were following the strict orders of Captain Randall, a man who knew how to flush out a criminal.

The men entered the saloon with caution. It was dimly lit but the rays of sunshine streaking through the dirty windows gave some light except for the shadows in the corners. Grant used his skills as a ranger to case out the place to make sure no one suspicious was hiding out of sight.

The two men took a seat at a table where their backs were not facing the door. Grant didn't plan on any surprises. Noah had the same idea when he sat with his back to the bar instead of the front door.

The saloon girl offered them a whiskey but both refused. "How about some of that ginger ale in a mug?"

She left to fill their order when Annabelle's brother walked in. He squinted, scanning the room, looking around. When Jack saw them sitting at the lone table, he went up to the bar, ordered a drink and came over to their table.

The moment Jack sat down another man walked in, scanning the room. It was obvious he was a city slicker, with a dark brown suit jacket and slacks to match. His white button down shirt was opened at the top. The dark haired stranger rested his eyes on the back of Jack's head. When he realized Grant was watching, he turned quickly towards the bar.

"We better start a card game or he may become suspicious." When the saloon girl brought their drinks, Grant asked for a deck of cards. As they began to play, the stranger occasionally looked their way, trying hard no to look out of the ordinary.

They all knew better. He was following Jack, it was obvious to a trained eye. Grant needed to see the proprietor of the mercantile, find out if there had been any telegrams recently. He had a suspicion the stranger was biding time.

After an hour of cards, Grant leaned back. "I'm out of this one, boys. Going to check on my supplies at the mercantile."

He made his way to the bar, standing beside the stranger. "Barkeep, I'm paying for the drinks at the table over there," he announced. After exchanging monies, Grant turned to the stranger. "If you're looking for a card game, there's an empty space at the table I just left. Help yourself."

The stranger picked up his glass, nodding to Grant. "Might just do that. Towns awful quiet for me."

Grant laughed. "You from the big city?"

The stranger nodded. "Philadelphia." He began to walk towards the table.

Grant followed him, then put a hand on his shoulder. "Welcome to Mill Ridge, then. You'll find our cozy town like nothing you ever seen before."

The stranger jumped slightly just as Grant knew he would. He was too nervous. It was the reason he placed his hand on the man's

shoulder. Noah saw as well and shifted his eyes. Grant nodded and left, knowing Noah would watch the man with a hawk's eye.

Grant waited until the mercantile was empty before approaching the owner. "How are sales on my shelves?"

"Sold out. When can I expect more?"

"I'll bring some in the next few days. Sorry, but I have some ranger stuff to do in the meantime. Maybe you can help me with that."

"Don't know that I can if I don't know what it is you need?"

Grant grinned. "I reckon you would be the only one in town who knows when a telegram comes in. There's a fellow comes from the big city of Philadelphia staying at the boarding house. Texas Rangers are keeping a suspicious eye on him, partner." Grant made sure to emphasize the last word.

The older man's brow shot up. "I have a telegram right here. He hasn't picked it up yet."

"Because there may be a crime involved, may I see the telegram?"

"Now you know I can't do that."

"Look, this town may be in danger. In another hour or two there may be a whole team of Texas Ranger's here to bring this guy and his cronies in. The law needs your help, sir."

The old man laughed. "Oh, hogwash! I can't rightly let you see this, but if I turn my back for a minute, I never can tell what may happen." The old man walked away, leaving the telegram in plain site.

Grant leaned over the counter to read the telegram before he turned back around. "Hold off giving that to him for a few hours if you can."

"I'll do my best. Darn machine acts up sometimes. Why, it may take hours to fix."

"Thanks. I'll stop by in a few days with more merchandise for you."

The old man leaned forward. "Anything going on I need my rifle for? Cause I ain't afraid to jump in and use it if I have to."

Grant shook his head. "No, sir, you keep that rifle handy but I think the Texas Rangers have this handled. We'll be taking this out of Mill Ridge if we can. Now, I'm counting on you to keep this under your hat for now."

“That’s a promise,” he told Grant, swearing up and down no one will find out from his lips.

That worried Grant, knowing how the town knew about something the moment it happened.

Grant strolled through town, taking his time. They needed to head to Wichita Falls to find out what time tomorrow’s train was expected but he also wanted Noah to feel out the city slicker. Noah was good at getting information from someone without them realizing a thing.

He missed Annabelle already. He hadn’t been gone more than a few hours and he missed her gentle touch. He was almost walking normal now, thanks to her. Grant vowed to keep her safe, and her brother, who she loved with all of her heart. She didn’t deserve to lose another one.

The plan was mapped out to lure the men from Mill Ridge on the road to Grant’s farm. Jack would make sure he set the pace as they followed him out of town. While en route, Jack would confront the men, get them to talk and admit their hand in his brother’s death and get out of the way before the rangers took over.

Most plans never worked accordingly. Grant knew this, so he had to remove Annabelle from the farm house in case someone escaped and made their way down the trail. Because they didn’t know how many men were coming, he had to take extra precautions. She’d have to stay with Elizabeth tomorrow when all of this went down.

Satisfied, Grant made his way to the saloon to fetch Noah. It would be a long five hours until he got back home to his lovely wife.

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Annabelle’s hands were red and sore. She’d been cooking and baking most of the day to keep her mind from thinking about Grant’s departure. Worried he’d run in to some type of trouble and more worried for her brother, the only thing to do was to keep busy. She’d gathered all the eggs earlier, making her way through the yard that now looked like a soldier’s camp. Several men stood guard while others followed behind when Grant and Noah left for town. The

rangers were scattered everywhere.

Annabelle had a hearty stew cooking away while two loaves of bread baked in the oven, leaving off a smell that drifted outside. She hoped Grant made it back by supper, at the latest. She knew he had a lot of work to do but wanted to spend time with him this evening.

Annabelle pulled out one of her special tins, the one that held the cocoa powder. These men were hungry so she stirred together her Grandmother's favorite recipe for chocolate cake, except she left it a tad thicker. Then she began to drop mounds by the spoonful on to a well buttered tin.

When the bread was ready, she removed the two loaves and replaced them with her half-moon shaped chocolate cakes. It would be much easier to serve this way than one large cake.

While they were baking, she whipped together some buttercreme and set it aside. Annabelle yawned. It had been hours since she stepped outside, so she opened the door to find most of the men had gone except for a few stationed at far corners of the property.

"It's smelling mighty fine in there," Captain Randall's voice came out of nowhere.

Annabelle jumped. She turned to find him leaning against the far wall in the corner of the porch, stationed where he could see approaching riders and anyone who came by the way of Noah's ranch. "You startled me, sir," she told him, her heart hammering in her throat.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Jennings. Didn't mean to." He tipped his hat.

"Do you think Grant will be back before dark?" During the day it wasn't so bad but if he stayed gone all night, Annabelle didn't want to be here without him. Even though the rangers were stationed all over the property, her heart would not beat the same until her husband came home.

"Sure will, he has instructions to be back here in three hours. Times ticking away. I'd say in about twenty more minutes your husband will be home."

She smiled. "I'm relieved to hear this. Supper should be finished by then."

“My stomach is waiting in anticipation of the fine food I’m smelling, if I do say so myself.”

“There’s plenty for everyone and I baked some of my Grandmother’s special cakes.”

“Thank you, ma’am. We sure do appreciate you looking after us the way you do.”

“I just want you to keep Grant safe. And Noah.”

“That’s a promise I intend to keep, Mrs. Jennings. Now don’t you be worrying one bit about your husband. He is highly trained and knows what to do.”

The sound in the far distance spoke of the return of the men with Grant and Noah in the lead. Annabelle hurried inside, taking the last batch of tins from the oven to let cool while she took the cooled cakes, two at a time and sandwiched them together with buttercream.

She knew the men would love these type of sweets. Annabelle’s grandmother had lived next to a farm in the countryside of Pennsylvania growing up. Her Amish neighbor had taught her to cook and bake like nobody’s business.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, she stirred the big pot of stew. The smell permeated through the air as she heard the men getting closer to the house. She smiled at their banter, getting the food to the table so they could eat.

“I’m starving,” one ranger announced.

“I hope we get some of that, it smells delicious!”

“You all mind your manners,” Randall told them. “Grant, your wife has worked her tail bone off cooking for us men. You’d best go let her know you made it home alive so we can fill our bellies.”

It didn’t’ take but a moment for Grant to come through the door. Annabelle gave him her warmest smile. Then she ran into his arms. “I’ve missed you so much.”

He looked at the big pot of stew and stack of bread on the table. “I can see you’ve been busy cooking.”

She gave him a kiss. “And baking.”

“Ah, no wonder the men are drooling.”

“Then I suppose we should eat.” Leaving his arms, Annabelle pulled

open the front door. “Come and get it, men,” she chided.

It didn’t take long for every single ranger to grab a bowl of Annabelle’s delicious stew. When she removed the towel from her tins of chocolate sandwich cakes, each man scarfed one up before going out on the porch to eat their meal.

Annabelle knew it was all worth the hard work when she saw the look on the men’s faces. Some of these rangers were far from home. Grant had told her stories of how he had to be on the trail of an outlaw for months at a time. She looked at her husband, sitting at the table eating his plate of food as if hadn’t eaten in months. She guessed old habits die hard.

Later on that evening, after everyone settled in for the night, Annabelle guided her husband to their bedroom where she was able to get out her special tin of ointment to put on his leg. She had noticed he limped somewhat when he got home. He had told her earlier that the train was going to bring the man who had killed John to Wichita Falls tomorrow.

“I want you to go to Elizabeth’s after I leave in the morning, Annabelle. I can’t take you but I want you to take the wagon and go. William will be here to escort you. Even if you have to spend the night there. I will come for you when this is all over.”

“I’d rather join you in the mission to find this horrible man and watch him hang for what he did to John.”

“Most times these men don’t hang. They’d rather shoot it out than go to jail. I need to know you are safe at the ranch.”

Annabelle bit her lip. She wanted to hurt the man but knew if she were in the way, it may cause horrible consequences. “When will you leave in the morning?”

“Before the rooster crows.”

She rubbed more oil on to his leg, working it into his muscles, which seemed tight. “Why so early?”

“We have to set up our men along the trail.”

“Please don’t let anything happen to Jack. He deserves a good life.”

Grant gathered her in his arms. He sighed so deep it worried her. “Don’t worry, Annabelle. I’ve got everything under control.”

They watched the moon play against the clouds through their little window. It was a long time before sleep finally came.

Chapter 8

*T*he brakes released with a whoosh as the train left the station. Four men in slick city suits wearing hats with short brims stood on the wooden platform, searching the area. Noah and Grant exchanged glances.

"Just as we suspected. You'd best be moving, Grant."

He turned the horse, not wasting a moment as he left town faster than he'd ever gone in his life. They had been sure Don Thomas would be standing at the train depot but now Grant was sure as rain the real Don Thomas was still in Mill Ridge, waiting on his men.

As he lay in bed last night, Grant had played the words from the telegram over and over in his head. Right before he fell asleep he realized the one who sent the telegram wasn't Thomas but one of his men letting his boss know they were on their way.

Grant swore as the trail slowed him down. A buggy had slowed in the middle of the road ahead. When he got closer, he realized it was Miss Addie. She was making her weekly jaunt to Mill Ridge, or so he thought. It seemed too early for even the matron of town to be out and about. "Morning, Miss Addie. You may want to high-tail it back to Wichita Falls this morning. We've got some trouble on the way."

Miss Addie patted her lap where a long rifle lay across. "I'm well prepared for trouble, Mr. Jennings. I already know about the men coming in on the train. I'm going to warn Caroline and get her away from the danger."

"How did you-" Grant didn't have to ask, he already knew the proprietor of the mercantile in Mill Ridge most likely told every living soul in town. That meant most of the townsfolk would be up in arms today, waiting on these men.

Grant dug in his heels. Captain Randall didn't want any more civilians involved. Grant shook his head. Randall had no idea the tenacity of the folks from these two towns. A small smile curved his mouth as he nodded and kept on the trail. Wichita Falls and Mill Ridge were filled with resilient folks who were not about to let anyone ruin what they had worked hard for. Did these folks even need the Texas Rangers?

More men were coming down the road. Grant was cautious as he got closer. Relief flooded over him when he realized it was rancher Marshall Montgomery and a few of his men, including his foreman Max, who rode like the dickens when he saw Miss Addie's buggy trailing behind.

"Montgomery," Grant called out. "Guess you heard about the goings on today in Mill Ridge."

Marshall Montgomery held out his hand. "Sure did, Ranger. Where can we be of use?"

"Escort Miss Addie to Mill Ridge and then have one of your men make sure she is removed from the boarding house with Caroline. I don't want Don Thomas to know we are on to him."

"My foreman Max can handle Miss Addie." He leaned over. "The man's been watching over her for many years."

"Well then, I reckon you and your men can mingle in town to make sure the four men coming this way don't harm anyone."

"Sure thing. Men, let's ride."

Grant slowed his pace somewhat, not wanting to draw too much attention if he got to town at the same time as the rancher. He looked back to see Max riding alongside the buggy, conversing with Miss Addie. They seemed comfortable together, as if they knew each other for years.

He wanted that with Annabelle. The thought of her being in harm's way reminded Grant he needed to follow the Captain's rules and stay back out of the way until the hustlers began to follow Jack on the road.

It was going to be hard as sin to do so. Grant wanted it over with. He didn't like the idea the road where all the action would take place

was too darn close to his farm. What if one of the men got loose and headed towards Annabelle. Then he remembered she was at the Holloway farm visiting with Elizabeth and relaxed. Being in love with someone changed things for Grant. He was more cautious these days. Before he met Annabelle, he'd go full force in to a battle, now, he wanted to make sure he went home.

Knowing the woman he loved was too close to danger got under his skin. Grant entered Mill Ridge with caution. Even though it appeared as if he were making his semi-weekly trek in to town, he felt the tension in the air. Not too many folks were out and about, a sign Thomas may recognize. He was no fool. He got this far by coming in alone and sending for his men after the fact, which was unusual to begin with. Grant and the other rangers had to stay alert.

Jack sat on the front porch on a rocker with three of the other guests of the boarding house.

Grant tried to act as normal as possible as he went by. "Good morning, Jack. Will we see you at the farm today?"

Jack swallowed, his face serious. He was nervous but hiding it well from anyone who looked on, except Grand was trained to notice these things. "I'll be leaving in about twenty minutes or so," he mentioned louder than necessary.

"I have business in town today so I can't ride back with you. I'll see you around sundown."

"Good day to you, Grant." Jack looked away while Grant scoured the area. No one on the porch was paying much attention to their conversation. The man they now knew as Don Thomas was not outside.

Grant stopped at the mercantile, taking his time going inside. He scanned the points where his men were posted, making sure everyone was in their place. If the four men coming to town started something, it would end rather quickly.

As he walked in to the mercantile, he noticed Miss Addie's buggy pull up to the boarding house. Max helped her out and went inside with the older woman. Annabelle would get a charge out of the two of them, he thought, his mind going back to his wife.

He grunted. No sense in day dreaming. He had a job to do. Grant spoke with the proprietor, who was nervous as a goose this morning. Grant stood with him at the counter, turning to the window where he had a good view of the whole street. “Don’t worry, sir, we won’t shoot up the town. You can most likely put your rifle away.”

The older man huffed. “No way, son. Rangers or not, I’m keeping this baby right by my side. It’s never let me down yet.”

As he conversed with the proprietor, Grant noticed a commotion when the door of the boarding house swung open. Miss Addie and Caroline hurried out towards the buggy, while Max stood guard. Jack stood up, then ran towards the livery. Grant assumed he went for a horse.

Grant ran out of the mercantile as fast as his leg would take him. He got on his horse, riding it up the street to see what happened. The other rangers were alert the moment they saw Grant riding hell bent for leather to the boarding house. “What’s happened?”

Max got on his horse. “I’m taking these two back to my ranch. The man who has been following Jack got away. I hear he is the man wanted in Philadelphia. If this is so, he snuck away and headed through the fields towards your farm without waiting for his back up.

Grant shouted to Max. “Get the women to safety.” The rangers in town all came forward. Grant motioned for three of them to follow him. “The rest of you stay here and guard this town. The moment those four others show up, arrest them.”

He knew Noah and Captain Randall were hiding on the trail right about where they presumed Jack would lead Thomas to. Except Thomas had fooled them all, taking to the fields. Somehow he found out where the farm was.

Grant took to the fields, commanding his men to ride the trail to inform the captain and Noah what was happening. Jack was ahead of him, racing towards the farm. It didn’t take long for Grant to catch up. “What happened? How does Thomas know where the farm is?”

“I think he overheard me talking to Caroline. If anything happens to my sister, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.”

“You won’t get the chance.” Grant pushed his mount faster,

knowing the horse could outrun Jack's horse. He'd get there before anyone else and put a stop to this once and for all.

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Annabelle wondered why it was taking William so long to get there. He was supposed to escort her back to the Holloway ranch, but it had been a few hours since the other rangers had gone on. She had assured the last ranger William would be here momentarily and sent him ahead, knowing she would be safe at the ranch.

Except William never showed up. Tired of waiting, Annabelle decided she'd load the wagon and head towards the ranch herself. After all, it was only a few miles down the opposite road where all the things were happening. A small worried frown covered her brow. What if Elizabeth went in to labor. Of course, she would have sent William to town to fetch Nurse Ellie since it was Tuesday.

It may be a long wait, Annabelle decided, gathering some of her grandmother's tins, along with flour and eggs. She placed them in a large basket and carried the load outside to her wagon.

Slowly she made her way towards the Holloway ranch when a rider came around the curve of the road. Annabelle pulled back on the reins so fast she tossed some of the contents of the wagon. "Careful there, mister!"

The rider came out of nowhere. He pulled a gun from his jacket. "Now, Miss, let's turn that wagon around and head back to your little house on the farm."

"Who are you and what in tar-nation do you want with me?"

Annabelle had a suspicion this was the man everyone was looking for. She sighed. He'd tricked them all, apparently. A whole tassel of Texas Rangers. She'd best be careful.

"I'm the man who killed John and I'm not afraid to pull the trigger. I believe you have something of mine and I'd like it back."

Annabelle looked at the man as if he were crazy. "Me? How would I have something of yours? That's ludicrous!"

"John said he sent it to his sister right before I took the breath from

his soul. Now, whatever he sent you through the mail, I suggest you find it right now."

Fear coursed through her veins. Even so, she had to defend herself from this monster. "That's ridiculous. He never sent me anything. Except for my grandmother's tins. They are right here in my basket." She slid from the wooden seat and pulled the basket from the back. "You can see for yourself. These are filled with cocoa, refined sugar and some other spices the dear woman was famous for putting in her baked goods. She taught me a lot so of course I'd want them. John and Jack both knew I would like them."

Thomas slid from his horse, making his way to the wagon. He reached in the basket, placing a tin in her hand. "Open the lids, I want to see."

Annabelle didn't like to be in such close proximity with this man. On one hand she was scared to death, on the other, she wanted to strangle him with her own bare hands. Although that was impossible, she did have a small pistol she carried with her when ever she left the house. It made her feel better since all this began. She was now glad she had it today.

Annabelle was forced to open one can after another until he saw there was nothing more than spices in the tins. She looked at him, his face angry now. "See, I told you I don't have anything. I'm sorry you had to come all this way for nothing."

Slowly, the man raised his arm. Annabelle stepped back. "What are you doing?" A fear so sudden and awful crawled all through her being. She didn't know if she had time to pull her own gun out and protect herself.

She didn't have to. A rustling in the bushes caught the man's eye. As he turned towards the noise, she saw her dear husband flying through the field, a gun in his hand, pointed at Thomas. Before Annabelle blinked the man in front of her fell to the ground, a look of utter surprise on his face.

Annabelle screamed. She didn't know what else to do. Blood poured from the bad man but she didn't dare get near him. He still held that awful gun in his hand. She backed up even more and turned to run

when Jack came out of the bushes. She fell in his arms.

"Sis, you're alright, thank you, God!" Her brother held on to her so tight Annabelle thought she would explode in his arms.

"Jack, let me loose! You are squeezing me too much!" She laughed then, watching his face as he realized what he was doing. She turned to her husband who was hovering over the dead man. He kicked the gun from the man's hand and pulled a blanket from the wagon to cover him up.

"Grant," she whispered, her knees beginning to knock. He was her hero. She fell in his arms as he wrapped them around her, kissing her all over. Without saying a word, he made her feel safe and loved.

"I love you, Annabelle and I'm sorry you had to go through this. I thought we had you safely tucked away. Why aren't you at the ranch with Elizabeth?"

"William never showed up. I'm worried why he didn't."

"Get back in the wagon, I'll have Jack escort you there." Annabelle didn't hesitate. She wanted to be away from the horrible man who tried to kill her and had already killed someone she loved.

Jack took the reins in one hand and placed his other around her. She took a moment to look back at her husband, who was waiting on the other rangers to show up since they weren't far behind. It was only a matter of time before the rangers got all the other bad men. She was glad to be away from the chaos.

When they got to the Holloway Ranch, there was a lot going on. Now she knew why William hadn't been on time today. Elizabeth was giving birth to a little boy. Annabelle forgot her own troubles to help with the delivery. Soon enough, there was a crying baby to delight its mother. "Noah will have a nice surprise when he returns home."

"I'm exhausted, Annabelle. Would you mind staying with me a bit longer?"

"Of course I will. I'm going to make dinner and do a bit of baking while you rest. The little one looks like he is in need of a nap, too." The tiny boy was snuggled up alongside his mother.

"Thank you, Annabelle." Her friend drifted off to a much needed sleep.

Annabelle spent the rest of the day cooking while her brother looked after the infant. With his doctor skills, he gave the baby and mother a thorough examination. “It looks like they are doing well. Noah has a healthy baby boy and wife.”

Annabelle turned to her brother. “Why don’t you stay in Mill Ridge? The town needs a doctor.”

Jack shrugged. “Not from what I understand. I saw Doc James while I was staying at the boarding house, along with Nurse Ellie.”

“They originate from Wichita Falls and come to Mill Ridge for two days of the week. I’m sure if you offered your services, they would be more than happy to let you take over. There is even a house to go along with the profession.”

“I’ll think it over. I really don’t have anything left in Philadelphia. I miss John.”

“I’m sure you do.”

“It’s my fault he got killed.”

Annabelle turned to him. “Nonsense. There was nothing you could do. It’s not your fault he fell in with bad men.”

“When he wanted to quit medical school, I encouraged him to follow his dreams instead of making him finish what he started.”

Annabelle gave him a hug. “Stop that, Jack. Each man follows his own path.”

“Even so, I’m having a hard time accepting the fact he is gone. It’s as if a part of me has died.”

“You two were twins. A part of you has died but the sooner you accept it was his journey and not yours, the sooner you will come back from the depths of despair.”

“I suppose. Thanks, Annabelle. You’ve always been there for me, no matter what.”

“It’s my job, Jack. I love you, brother. Now, help me with these cakes that have gone over so well at the farm. I’m going to make a big batch for the ranch hands here.”

Two days later, Noah and Grant rode in. Annabelle was beginning to worry but kept busy helping the cook and cleaning and holding the little one when Elizabeth needed rest. Her days were filled with so

much she hardly realized two days had gone by.

When she saw Grant coming in through the door, she dropped her cup of flour and ran in to his arms. “Your home!”

He gathered her close. “I’ve missed you.” His voice sounded so weary.

“Let me finish getting the dinner and we’ll go home. I’ll be ready in a half hour.”

Noah had gone in to see Elizabeth and the new baby so Annabelle didn’t get a chance to say goodbye. She didn’t want to disturb them. “Let her know I’ll be back to check up in a few days.”

The cook nodded, unable to speak English too well. She gave Annabelle a hug. Jack had gone back to the boarding house the day before, wanting to catch up with Doctor James.

Annabelle placed her precious tins in her basket, placing them along side her on the wooden bench. She followed Grant back to their farm house. She was talking so much, telling him about the baby and everything that had gone on at the ranch she didn’t pay attention to the holes the little pups left near the front of the house. Before Grant was able to warn her, the wagon ran over a hole and her basket fell to the ground.

The tins fell out, along with its contents. Even though they laughed about the mess, Annabelle slid from the seat and Grant got off his horse to pick up the tins.

“All my cocoa is ruined,” Annabelle stated. “Now I’ll have to order more. The little prairie dogs will have some thing to eat. Well, what’s this?” She peered in to the bottom of the tin container.

“What’s wrong, Annabelle?”

Grant stood, a worried look on his face. He was always taking precautions these days when it came to her. She smiled at his anxiety, even though she shouldn’t. “It looks like a hidden compartment. Now, this is silly. What would my grandmother have to hide in a secret compartment in her cocoa tin?”

“Let me see?” Grant took the tin and peered in like Annabelle did. He took out his knife, removing the bottom of the tin with the sharp edge. A long whistle sounded.

“What is it?”

“Look for yourself.” When he handed the tin back, Annabelle let out a gasp. Rolls of bills tied together were huddled in the bottom of her grandmother’s tin. “She never had this much money!”

“I doubt it is hers. You said John sent these tins to you?”

A bell went off in Annabelle’s head. She nodded. “About a month before he died, he sent them here. My grandmother, who lived in Philadelphia before she passed, had given these to a friend of hers. When the friend found out the boys were there in medical school, she had made it known she wanted to get the tins to me. So he sent them here.”

“I guess before he died, he may have divulged that information to Thomas. This is the money John hid from Thomas.”

“This money did no one any good. There are two men dead because of it. Is this evidence?”

Grant shrugged. “There is no longer a case since the man is dead. The four men who got off the train were hired gunmen who were paid a salary to divert attention away from him. We sent them on their way. They had no problem leaving town in a hurry or get put in jail.”

“So this money doesn’t really belong to anyone then?”

Grant grinned. “It appears so. There’s a lot of money there.”

“More than we will ever need. Grant, I’d like to do something good with it. At least turn the bad around.”

He gathered her in his arms. “Name it and I’ll make it happen.”

She closed her eyes, enjoying the warmth of her husband’s arms. He had been limping again after being away for so long. “I want to build a school and name it after my brother. If the town will allow this.”

“We’ll take it up with the townsfolk tomorrow. Right now, I want you all to myself.”

“I’ve noticed your limp, dear husband. See, you don’t take proper care when you are not home. I’m going to have to work extra hard to get that leg back to normal.”

“Does that include a warm bath and your fancy oil?” He nuzzled her neck.

She giggled. “Yes, I believe it does.”

“Hmm, well, there’s room in that metal tub for the both of us.”

Annabelle gasped, pretending to be offended. “That’s preposterous!” she claimed, throwing her head back and laughing.

He joined her. “Well, shall we find out?”

“I guess you challenged me, dear husband. I’m now curious to know if the tub will hold us both.”

Grant and Annabelle set out to find out. Grant dragged it from the side of the house, while she set about warming the water. After an hour and a half, they both soaked in the tub in the middle of their kitchen, laughing with arms wrapped around each other.

“It’s a tight fit,” Annabelle complained.

“Not at all, it feels just right,” Grant told her. “I love you, Annabelle. I want a dozen children and a farm filled with love and your delicious baked goods.”

“Then you best get to building on to this tiny house, my husband. Because I do believe in six months or so, we will be in need of another room.”

Grant was silent. He didn’t move. Annabelle was afraid to look up at him. He just said he wanted children but maybe he didn’t mean yet. “Oh, dear, did I say something wrong.”

“No, my love, you said everything just right. I’m going to be a father?”

She nodded, chancing looking in to his eyes. When she did, they were bright and glassy. The emotion from them made her catch her breath. “Grant?”

He lifted his hands to her face, cupping her cheeks and pulling her close for a long kiss. “Thank you.”

She giggled, relief flooding through her. “You may not say that in a few months. Twins run in my family.”

He laughed out loud. “The more the merrier.”

“I love you, Grant. I can’t wait to see what this baby will be.”

“I love you, Annabelle. I’m so glad you came in to my life and redeemed this ranger.”

She nuzzled his neck. “I love you more.”

“Impossible! Let me show you.”

He did. She screamed in delight as he lifted her from the tub in one smooth movement, a trail of water leading across the floor as the door slammed shut. It was going to be a wonderful reunion.

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Thank you for reading Grant and Annabelle's story.

Jack and Caroline's story is next in ***A Doctor's Devotion***. Caroline Adams is hiding a secret she dare not reveal to her new husband, Jackson Hart.

Dr. Hart, brother to Annabelle in The Ranger's Redemption, falls in love and marries Caroline the moment he lays eyes on her. Except when she begins to act strange, disappearing at times, he begins to wonder if he has made the right decision.

When Doc Hart finds out the truth, will he push her away like everyone else always has?

Keep reading for more!

A Doctor's Devotion

Book #4

For one of my readers, Sheila Mast. This one is for you!

Chapter 1

"I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride." Caroline's pulse raced up one side of her and down the other. She closed her eyes as his head lowered. She was not going to faint! Her hands shook slightly as her new husband held her hands in between them and leaned over.

Caroline peeked from her long, dark lashes as his mouth encased hers in a brief kiss. It was swift and soft and yet it made her jump. Yes, jump. She almost lost her balance but Jack held on to her hands. He gave them a squeeze and looked deep in to her eyes then, instantly calming the millions of nerves that had her ready to abandon ship, so to speak.

"Don't be afraid," he said, his low tone reassuring her.

She nodded. A slight headache began to take shape in the back of her head. Worry caused a crease in her brow. Taking in a deep breath, she forced herself to calm down, focusing on getting through the ceremony. It would do her no good to get one of those awful, debilitating headaches on her wedding day.

As he moved away from her, Mill Ridge's resident preacher closed the good book with a snap of his hand. "May I now introduce our newly married doctor and his bride, Mister and Misses Jackson Hart."

The Sunday crowd began to clap. Jackson's sister, Annabelle, who was sitting in the front pew of the renovated church with her newly acquired husband, Grant, moved towards them to be the first to congratulate the couple.

She took a deep breath and let her fingers slide from her husband's hand. He gazed at her for a moment before turning to the other well wishers. Shame rushed through her that she had deceived him so. He

didn't deserve it and yet she had no choice. Well, she did have a choice but chose to hide her problems under a rug for the time being. At least until she figured out what to do. Caroline was too scared to tell anyone in fear she'd be put to death. It had been done before, but she never thought in modern times someone would try to again.

She didn't want to die.

Not for something she had no control over.

"You are now truly my sister," Annabelle's sweet voice rang out, giving her a hug so tight Caroline thought her corset would squeeze the air from her lungs in that very moment. "You look beautiful in your wedding dress."

"Thank you," she told her new sister-in-law.

Annabelle, much like her brother, always said the right thing to sooth her tortured soul. She began to speak again in her low resonating voice. "You've come a long way, Caroline. I remember when you first moved to the boarding house and were so afraid to look someone in the eye because of your birth defect, which, of course, is a Godsend now since it caught my brother's eye, don't you think?"

Caroline nodded. Her one blue eye and one hazel eye had caused her to always cast her gaze downward, until Annabelle had taught her she was unique and to never hide what God has given you. She didn't have to say much with Annabelle. The other woman always did the talking while she nodded and agreed with her, commenting when expected. Like she did with most people. If they truly knew the fear that rested inside of her heart, most would be shocked out of their shoes. Somehow, she faked her interest in a conversation and no one ever noticed.

The reasons were not because she had no interest in others. Not at all. She had to concentrate so hard on keeping herself calm it was too exhausting to respond at times. Most people thought she was extremely shy and let it go at that.

If they saw what happened sometimes when the awful headaches came, she would surely be branded a witch like they had done in her home town on the outskirts of Boston.

“I don’t see any of your relatives here, dear? Were they unable to attend?”

Caroline was now forced to speak. Her words were spoken softly so not to trigger the headache. She had learned how to control it for at least a little while. Especially in front of others. “I’m afraid my mother fell ill and was not able to travel. She sent her love and well wishes and hopefully they will be able to visit someday.” Except Caroline knew that day would never come. She hadn’t sent a telegram to her parents about the wedding.

They had encouraged her to become a mail order bride, well, begged her, even helping her to slip away in the middle of the dark night. When that evil man had kidnapped her and the rest of the brides-to-be so long ago, she hadn’t even been able to write home to her parents as they were non-existent to her. They told her cutting all ties was for the best.

She remembered the last time she had ever seen her mother. With tears in both their eyes, they clung onto each other while her father gave her a swift hug and told her to get on the first train in the next town and never look back.

The fact was she was glad to be away from that awful place she had called home. Trying to make a new life somewhere else wasn’t easy. Her parents probably assumed she had married her intended groom except for the fact he was a shyster, luring young brides west only to sell them to the highest bidder.

Thank the good Lord the people of Wichita Falls had saved her and the others. Miss Addie, the owner of the matchmaking agency had taught her so much, giving her a chance to make a living as proprietor of the boarding house in Mill Ridge at first. She had learned so much. It was time to make a new life with her newly acquired husband who had no idea what he was in store for.

Now, she stood here with her new husband and darling sister-in-law preparing for a life as a doctor’s wife.

Would she be able to fake it until she figured out a way to tell her husband the secret she held so close no one must ever know? She wasn’t prepared to tell him yet even though sooner or later, he was

bound to find out.

Or, would he cast her away like everyone else in her life had?

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Jack stood to the side, pretending to listen to Grant and Salem talking about a thief in town. Turned out it was a strange dog that crept through town in the middle of the night. It was larger than a wolf, and seemed to know how to slink around without getting caught.

“Several townsfolk have been leaving food out for this wild animal. I swear it is a futile thing to do. Only makes for more work on the part of the law,” Sheriff Nightingale complained. “I’m not staying up all night to watch out for a wild dog. He hasn’t hurt anyone, just wants a bite to eat is all.”

Grant seemed to agree. “No sense in trying to corner the animal unless he tries to hurt one of the chickens in the back yards. So far he’s left them alone.”

Jack didn’t respond, his eyes were on his new bride. A small grin crossed his face.

“Jack, ain’t you supposed to go on home now? It’s your wedding night?” Grant teased him, nudging his brother-in-law.

“It does look like Caroline has had enough. She is rubbing her temple. I wonder if she has another headache.”

Grant and Salem looked at each other and grinned. “Good one, Jack. Make an excuse for her and get her on home.”

He pulled a stopwatch from his jacket. “Although I would love to go home, I believe there’s plates of food outside waiting for everyone to celebrate.”

Grant laughed. “I think you and Mrs. Hart will be doing some of your own celebrating.”

The moment the two men standing with him began to laugh at the joke, his eyes went to Caroline when she excused herself from the small crowd and came forward, a pasted smile on her face. He saw how she worked hard to nod to others but there was an underlying

caution in her eyes he was starting to notice way too well.

He took a few steps until he reached her. “Caroline? Are you not feeling well?”

She sighed. “I’m afraid this is too much. My head is beginning to spin. I’d like to go home before it gets worse. I’m so sorry.”

He nodded. Turning toward the front of the church, Jack scanned the area for the man who married them. When he spotted the good man, he kissed his new wife on the cheek, and placed a hand on her elbow. The two moved towards the front of the church.

“Reverend? May we speak with you?”

The man of God turned to them, a large smile on his kind face. “What is it?”

“My wife is feeling a bit under the weather. We’re going to excuse ourselves for a spell. My apologies for not being able to attend the reception.”

The reverend nodded. He turned to Caroline. “Mrs. Hart, do you need to sit down? You are looking quite pale.”

She shook her head, even though it looked as if it pained her to do so. “I’m wishing to go home. If I can lie down, I’ll feel better soon.”

“As you wish,” he told her. “Go on now, Jack, get your wife home.”

Jack didn’t want to draw attention. He knew it was considered rude to leave a reception in your honor but by the look on Caroline’s face, they didn’t have a choice. As a doctor, he had noticed how she got frequent headaches at times but she always shrugged them off as if they were nothing. It usually had ended their courting nights quite early at times. His concern was always for her well being, so he never hesitated to take her to the boarding house so she was able to rest. The next day, he had always checked in on her and a few times she had been under the weather. Her skin had been pale and her eyes strained but other than that, she had said she was fine. Looking at her now, he wondered if there wasn’t much more to these headaches than she was saying.

He turned to her, noticing how pale her skin looked. “I believe if we take a walk that way,” he pointed, “we can slip out the side door.”

Thank you, she mouthed. Clasping his hand tight, they made their

way to the door without anyone trying to stop them.

When Caroline got outside, she inhaled the evening air, taking it in as if she had been deprived of oxygen. “That’s much better. I’m so sorry, Jack. I’m afraid today was too much for me.”

He placed a hand over her shoulder and guided her down the street towards the doctor’s office and their new home.

Miss Addie had leased the building for the purpose of a doctor’s office. It was a two story white clapboard house with a large front porch right on the main street in town. While Dr. James and his wife Nurse Ellie from Wichita Falls had traveled back and forth to open the offices and offer medical assistance two days a week, the town was growing and needed a full time doctor.

When Jack came here a few months ago to tell his sister Annabelle about their brother’s death, he had packed his bags with no intention of returning to Philadelphia. He’d be the luckiest man alive to never step foot in that city again. It was where his twin brother had been murdered.

The moment Miss Addie found out he was a doctor, she had asked the town to offer him a position as Mill Ridge’s new doctor. Even though it was a far cry from city life, he accepted heartily as he had no where else he wanted to go.

Learning how different it was here, with patients unable to pay at times, he had inherited a whole back yard filled with chickens who laid plenty of eggs. It was then he realized he wanted a wife and family like most others had. He began to court Miss Caroline the moment he laid eyes on her, knowing he didn’t dare to let her go.

She was the most caring, loving, beautiful woman he had ever met. Her multi-colored eyes had looked in to his own and he was lost in her beauty. The first day he had opened the doctor’s office and Dr. James and Nurse Ellie introduced her as the proprietor of the boarding house, Jack knew without a doubt he would marry her.

She had appeared at his door every morning long before his practice opened. She had carried her basket on a slender arm, patiently waiting for him to let her in so she may go out in the back yard and fill the basket with eggs to cook breakfast for her renters.

She'd take what she needed and sell the rest to the mercantile, repeating the task each morning. Every morning there was a jar brimming with coins from the sale of eggs.

After a few days, Jack forced himself awake earlier to make sure he spent time with her. He offered for her to sit a spell on the front porch in full view of the townsfolk. Several times she took him up on the offer, sitting in the bench outside while conversing over a fresh cup of coffee.

After several weeks, Jack had asked to court her. She would stare at him with those beautiful multi-colored eyes until answering him with a shy nod.

Today she had become his beautiful bride. He took her arm as they made their way down the street. The closer they got to their front porch, the more her arm shook. Was she so frightened of their marriage bed she had made herself sick? He wanted to calm her fears. Jack stopped dead in the middle of the street, turning her to him. "Caroline, listen to me. I'm not sure what is bringing on this headache of yours but as a doctor of medicine, I'm wondering if stress isn't playing a large part. I don't want you to worry about tonight. I've two bedrooms."

Caroline tilted her head down and closed her eyes so he wasn't able to see her reaction. But he knew she was relieved. It saddened him that he was not going to have a wedding night after all but at the same time wanted only the best for his new wife. "Thank you," she whispered, her pained voice so low he had to move closer to hear. "I'm afraid I need to go lie down this instant."

She moved away from him, taking the few steps on to the porch. Jack watched her fumble with the door knob before jumping in to help. He laid his hand over her cold, pale hand and turned the knob. "It's alright, wife. Can you make your way upstairs?"

Caroline nodded again, her intent to be away from him evident. He frowned as he watched her scurry up the stairs as if her whole body was hurting. She had moved all her belongings in earlier today, before the wedding party came to get ready. Now, he stood in the parlor, alone, on his wedding night. It was supposed to be the happiest day of

his life.

Jack raced up the stairs when he heard a loud thump. “What the -” Taking them two at a time, he reached the landing in no time flat.

The door to her room was closed. He heard something strange, as if she were jumping around. “Caroline! Are you alright? What is going on?” Concern caused him to turn the knob and push against the door. The door was locked. The wood was so thick, it would take more than a quick push to open up. “Caroline!”

The noise went on for about three minutes. Jack knew exactly how long it was because he had cracked open his watch the moment he knew he wasn’t able to get inside. He snapped the watch closed.

“Open up, Caroline!” Knock after knock went unanswered until Jack had enough. He slammed his shoulder and most of his weight against the door several times.

A groan from inside caused him to still. Fear prickled against his skin. His fist in mid-air, he held it there as a shuffling noise made its way to where he stood.

The knob turned. A dishevelled Caroline, her dark hair free from its neat arrangement lay haphazardly around her shoulders. She peeked through the half-closed door, her eyes swollen and red, the pupils dilated. “What is it?” she asked as if he were casually knocking to come in.

“I heard something,” he told her, pushing the door gently away from where she stood. Caroline took a step back, her body teetering somewhat.

“I must have fallen,” she said, as if surprised herself. Jack was puzzled, he’d never seen this type of behavior before.

Caroline tried to be nonchalant, pushing the fly-a-way hair from her face. Except when she did, her arm kept going, knocking her off balance. “I feel so weak,” she muttered before slipping to the floor.

Jack caught her right before she hit the wooden planking. He picked her up in his arms and moved towards the bed. Placing her on the slip cover, he placed a pillow gently under her head. There was something wrong.

Something medically wrong.

By the looks of utter fear in her beautiful multi-colored eyes, his wife was holding something back from him.

She looked as if she were caught in the middle of a bank robbery gone wrong.

Chapter 2

Caroline's whole body tensed when Jack stared at her, knowingly. As if he knew exactly what had happened. Fear raged inside of her, clamping down on her throat so hard she was unable to breath. If he found out what had happened, would he cast her out? A tear slid down her cheek. She had nowhere to go, no one who understood her sickness.

With every ounce of energy she had left, she had to reassure him she was fine and whatever those dark eyes of his thought had happened, Caroline had to make sure he never found out. She didn't want pity. Nor did she want to see the horrible fear that had struck her parents when they saw her flailing on the floor the first time it had happened. She had to avoid that at all costs. In her weakened state of mind, Caroline vowed to never reveal her true malady to her new husband. She'd tell him about the headaches but nothing more.

She lifted a weak hand to rest on his cheek. "I'll be honest, Jack. I've had headaches like these all my life. I get stressed and they overcome me, sometimes it takes a day or two to revive. I am so sorry I didn't tell you at first. Perhaps you'd thought twice before marrying me."

"Why didn't you tell me?" He covered her hand with his. "I am a doctor. We can get to the root of the cause, you know. I've studied quite a bit and I've got some books with me that may help. Most of the time the cause of a headache comes from stress. I'd hate to know that marrying me caused you to become ill."

"No, Jack. It isn't because of you. I wasn't fair to you by failing to mention them. If you would like to annul the marriage, I will accept my fate."

Jack smiled, tilting his head as he squeezed her hand. “I’m not going anywhere, Mrs. Hart. Not over a few headaches.” He stood up, taking a quilt from the dresser by the window and unfolding it to lay across her. “Get some rest. I’ll study my medical journals and see if we can’t find a cure for these recurring headaches.”

Caroline gazed at this wonderful man through heavy eyelids, trying to fall asleep. She wanted him to know she was grateful for his care. It wasn’t right his wedding night consisted of tending to a sick wife. “I’m sorry, Jack. I promise to make it up to you, somehow.”

He tucked the blanket around her and grinned. “Don’t worry none, my darling Caroline, I am sure you will.” He placed his lips against her forehead. Caroline sighed.

No one had ever taken one minute to make her feel cared for, reassured. Her parents had tried to stuff her away in her bedroom, closing the door when she had her fits and headaches, trying to hide from others who may see her. Because it had happened the first time on the school playground, she had been kept home from school, learning how to read and write through books her mother brought from the library. Even church was reduced to getting there right before the sermon started to slipping out before it ended. After awhile, her parents left her at home on Sunday to fend for herself.

Her whole life she had been hidden away from everyone. She had been shamed and ridiculed because of the headaches and what came afterwards by her own parents because they were horrified and scared. Many nights afterwards, her body too weak to respond, she heard her mother pray to God to take her life before it ruined everyone else's.

Those were the days Caroline had asked to die. She didn’t want to live in a world where other people called her a witch because of something she had no control over.

At least now she was free of those people, had been for some time. There was no use thinking back to those days any longer. She had a new life in Mill Ridge. The people seemed to care about her.

Yet, she wondered how much they would care if she fell to the ground and her arms and legs began to flail around out of control?

Then it would be a different story altogether, she was certain.

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Caroline felt the warmth from the sun's rays shining through the window. She stretched and tried to sit up, even though all she wanted to do was lie in bed forever. That way no one would ever find the truth about her sickness.

A figure stirred in the corner, making her sit up and cover herself with the quilt. Somehow, she was wearing her night dress. Caroline hadn't remembered changing her clothes at all.

Dark eyes rested on her. Jack was leaning back in a chair he brought from another room, a few medical journals on the dresser beside him. Dark hair, dishevelled, hung down over his brow before he pushed it back in place. The smell of oil from an extinguished lamp drifted across the room, as if the light had been doused not too long ago. "Have you been up all night, Jack?"

He stretched again. "Appears so. I hope you don't mind, but I wanted to check on you and make sure your headache didn't get any worse. I thought it best to do my reading right here."

"Thank you. What are you reading?"

"It's a new book by Edward Liveing on sick-headaches and some allied disorders. It's a contribution to the pathology of nerve-storms."

Caroline swung her feet over the side of the bed and stopped, afraid to stand on her own in her weakened state. "I am not sure I understand."

Jack stood. "Tell me about your headaches, Caroline. What happens when it first comes on. How do you feel?"

She sighed. It wouldn't hurt to describe the headaches but she wasn't going to tell him about the uncontrollable fits that sometimes happened afterwards. "I feel a sharp pain in my temple. After awhile, if I don't lie down in a darkened room, it reaches my entire head and neck."

Jack rubbed his unshaven chin, while the two-day old whiskers made a slight scraping noise in the quiet room. "Interesting. How

about auras? Do you see any, Caroline?"

"What? You mean lights? Sometimes there is this light but it's in my one eye, usually my right eye. The light is so bright. I can't see anything else but shadows and that light. It happens right before the awful shooting pain that covers my whole head."

It exhausted her thinking about it, but Jack was intent on answers. He at least deserved her response to his questions. "Caroline, has there ever been any way to relieve yourself of the pain?"

She clutched the quilt to her breast. It was embarrassing to admit this. She nodded.

"What helps?" His gentle voice stirred her to answer as honestly as possible. Jack was trying to help.

She closed her eyes. "If I force myself to vomit."

He moved to sit beside her on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry you are going through this." Jack took her in his arms and held her there for a moment, long enough to help her relax. It was as if he knew she was about to get even more upset.

She raised her chin and looked at him, his tender face showing nothing but warmth and caring. "No one has ever asked me to describe how I felt."

He hugged her. "If you had these headaches since a young age, what did your parents do about them?"

It was an innocent question but she stiffened thinking about how they had reacted. How the whole town reacted to her sickness. She shrugged, unwilling to discuss it any further. She would never reveal her childhood secret now.

This wonderful man was willing to put up with her headaches. He had made her feel loved, cared for in the few hours since her wedding. It was all she had ever wanted, all her dreams were in front of her with this wonderful man. She reached up and cupped his face.

Except he seemed to want more answers. "Did you ever go to a doctor?"

She shook her head. "My parents were not well to do, Jack. We were unable to afford a doctor unless we were in dire straits. My mother had me lie down in a quiet place and it would be better soon

after. She said there was no need for a doctor."

Jack frowned. "I do believe you may have what's called a megrim or sick-headache."

She turned to stare at him. "A what?"

"It's a type of headache called migraines. From everything you told me, it seems these headaches derive from certain factors. According to the sources in Liveings book, these sick-headaches are thought to be a brain dysfunction caused by nerve-storms that originate in the brain."

"Nerve-storms? You mean like thunderstorms?" She almost laughed at that. Except it did feel as if a storm brewed and then came out of nowhere.

He nodded. "I have much more reading to do on the matter, but we will get to the bottom of your migraines, my sweet wife. I don't want you to worry one bit."

She sighed. He may be satisfied for now but if she ever had a fit in his presence, Caroline was sure she'd be taken to an insane asylum, like the townsfolk in her home town wanted to do. Or, jail her as a witch and sentence her to death. It sounded far-fetched, even in this modern society, yet her mother had warned her it may happen if she had stayed in Boston.

She looked at her new husband. For now, she wanted to know what it was like to have a man's loving arms around her to protect and cherish her, even if someday she'd be found out.

All she had to do was try to control her headaches. If she was able to do that, perhaps the fits wouldn't come. Now that Jack knew about them, calling them migraines, she may be able to stave off the other horrible part of her sickness.

"I want you to take it easy for awhile. I know you are used to working hard everyday, but until I find a resolution for your headaches and what triggers them, I propose complete bed rest."

She nodded, knowing she'd go crazy staying in bed but at the same time understanding it took some time for her body to heal after each episode. She never had the good fortune to rest before. Working at the boarding house didn't afford her such luxuries. When she was there, she had less headaches, most likely since she was so busy she didn't

have time to stress about anything. Whatever her doctor husband ordered, she'd listen to. Caroline would do anything to avoid the horrible nightmarish headaches at all costs.

Lately she took notice with each recurring fit her healing process took much longer. "I promise I'll rest, I am getting sleepy again," she admitted.

"Back in bed, then," the doctor ordered. He covered her with the quilt, tucking it on either side. His face lingered over hers, his dark eyes staring at her mouth.

"You may give me a kiss," she told him. "It will make me feel better."

She reached for his face, outlining the dimple that appeared when he laughed. He dipped his head and kissed her softly, placing his forehead against hers. "We will get to the bottom of this, I promise."

"I know," she told him, offering herself for one more kiss. "I trust you, Jack Hart and I don't know why, but I do."

If only he could trust her.

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Jack hurried old Mrs. Lansley along, not wanting to interrupt her conversation but he had something important to do. "I'm certain your son will make sure you get your medicine on time, Mrs. Lansley. Would you like me to speak with him?"

"That would be best," she continued. "I am getting so forgetful. There are days when I don't remember if I took it or not, so I get worried that I take too much. It makes me sleepy and forgetful."

"Let's be on our way. I'll walk you home since I have to make some other stops. That way I can explain to Billy the tincture must be taken twice a day."

"Oh, thank you, Doc, but he is at work. The sawmill hired him yesterday." She stood up and held out her arm so Jack was able to lead her out the front door. They began to walk down the street towards her small home next door to the mercantile. Several times he stopped so she was able to cover her mouth with a cloth and cough.

“Now, Mrs. Lansley, the medicine in the tincture will help you to stop coughing so much but it will make you sleepy in order for your body to heal and push out the infection. I’ll check on you tomorrow morning. Have Billy give you some more this evening when he comes home. I’ll stop by the sawmill to remind him.”

He had spoken to Billy the other day about making sure his mother had taken her medicine and the young man assured Jack he had been faithful in giving it to her. That led to another issue. Mrs. Lansley was getting forgetful. He needed to keep an eye on her more closely.

“Good day, Doc Hart. Thank you kindly for walking me home.”

“My pleasure. Now please get some rest.”

The older woman stared at him as if he were talking about consorting with the devil. Jack grinned as he walked away. Some of these hardy western women were so stubborn and forceful, it was hard to give them instructions. He had no doubt he’d have to up her tincture to make sure she got some good rest.

Jack stopped by the saw mill at the end of town to remind Billy to give his mother her tincture. “We don’t want her winding up with congestion, it will be hard on someone of her age.”

After Billy reassured Jack he was giving the medicine as directed, he made his way to finish his deeds for the morning. If his hunches were right, there was much more to this story than what Caroline was telling him. The thought of her condition being much worse caused a cold shiver across his skin. As he walked towards the mercantile to send a telegram to Philadelphia, he kept hearing that certain thump and disturbing noise right before he had raced up to her room, only to find the door locked. As if she knew what was about to happen.

He sighed. No telling how long it would take to get the information he requested from a colleague in medical school who was proficient in the science of neurology. In the meantime, as a doctor of the medical board, he had to keep his wife’s best interest at heart. As her husband, he wanted to get her on a train to Philadelphia where some of the best doctors were attending.

Time was not on his side here in the wilds of western civilization.

Chapter 3

Caroline shrugged away the quilt when she heard strange noises coming from outside. The cackling sounds drifting to her window told her one thing, the chickens were in a squander. She raced to look out to find white feathers floating through the morning air all over the back yard. Even though there was a fence surrounding the little birds, someone or *something* was causing a commotion.

A dark tail attached to a large body caught her attention. It was racing around the hen house now, causing a disturbance. “Jack?” she called out, not hearing any noise from his downstairs office.

Caroline clung on to the wooden railing as she made her way down the steps in her weakened state, trying to hurry out the back door to catch whatever varmint was disturbing those money-making precious chickens. Most of the renters at the boarding house relied on these eggs daily for a hearty breakfast. She was not going to allow some wild animal to help themselves to her chickens!

As an afterthought she tucked a broom under her arm before stepping into the backyard filled with chicken poop and flailing chickens.

A large dog with black and tan fur rushed towards her with a chicken hanging from it’s mouth. The feathers were everywhere, causing Caroline to cough and wave them from her line of vision. “You stop right there!” she ordered.

The animal hesitated for a moment, staring her down like a gunfighter about to have a showdown in the middle of the street. “This is my property, and you will drop the chicken right now!”

The chicken was stiff until it fell to the ground, it’s little form coming alive as if it had a sudden urge to get away from its attacker. The wild dog kept a steady eye on her while she wielded the broom

around like an ancient sword.

It whined. Caroline was so shocked she almost dropped the broom. That wouldn't be a smart move since she didn't know if this animal was harmless or not. It had a large jaw with teeth like a wolf, except the coloring was all wrong. The black and tan color told her this had been someone's pet. Even though she had never seen a wolf up close and personal, the shape and beady eyes reminded her of one she saw from a distance while on the train to Wichita Falls so long ago.

Its head moved back and forth, first to the chickens that had found a hiding place and then to her, its eyes begging for mercy.

Caroline was not going to let this mongrel get away with disturbing her working chickens. "Come here," she ordered.

The animal took a step forward, almost as if it were used to commands. Her strong, steady voice worked. She almost smiled even though she worried it may attack in retaliation.

"How did you get in here, did you jump my fence?"

The animal whined again before looking to the chickens huddling behind their pens.

"Are you hungry?" She didn't know much about these types of dogs but she did know hungry when she saw it staring her in the face. Except the moment she moved to reach for the back door, the dog leaped over the fence so fast Caroline didn't have time to blink twice.

"You leave my chickens be!" she hollered.

For over twenty minutes, she hid behind the kitchen door, watching the back yard in case the intruder came back. A small movement from the corner of the yard caught her eye. There it was, hiding in the tall grass and rocks. The dog was stubborn and wanted her chickens even more now. She figured it was most likely hungry, since she had noticed ribs sticking out from its fur when she got a close-up earlier.

Rummaging through the kitchen, she filled a bowl with oatmeal and warmed up buttermilk to pour over top. Caroline was careful to step outside quietly so she didn't scare the thing off. She opened the back gate and set the bowl carefully on the ground, quietly moving back to her hiding place.

Caroline watched in amazement as the dog slinked up to the food,

sniffing first, then taking its strong jaw and picking up the whole bowl with its mouth. Looking up to make sure no one was there, the dog caught her staring from the door as it took off, dish and all.

Caroline giggled. Unable to help herself, its where Jack found her a few moments later.

"You should be in bed," he scolded, coming up behind her. "What's so funny?" He followed her gaze. "Where are the chicks?"

Caroline turned in his arms. "We've had quite the excitement this morning."

His brow raised, he grinned. "I'm glad you find the back yard so amusing. Come one now, back to bed." He didn't wait for an answer or argument. His arms went around her as he lifted her up and took the stairs two at a time, placing her back in bed.

"Jack, I don't need to be babied so. I can take care of myself."

He placed the quilt back over her, tucking in the edges once again and placed a finger over her mouth. "Hush, time to rest. Until we get to the bottom of these migraines, I want a sworn promise you'll rest. I'll make sure the new proprietor of the boarding house gathers the eggs this morning. What is her name?"

"It is Roberta but she likes to be called Robbie."

He nodded and placed a sweet kiss on her forehead. Caroline smiled up at her new husband. "It's not fair but you do take good care of me."

"I'll bring you breakfast in a little while. You need to keep up your strength."

She reached up to touch his cheek, resting her palm across the dimple there. "So do you. I should be making our breakfast right now."

"Nonsense." He shrugged it off before closing the door gently behind him. "You rest, my darling Caroline."

Which made it harder than ever to deceive him so. Jack was a good man. He courted her like a real gentleman before asking for her hand in marriage. She cursed herself even more for not being honest from the beginning. Sinking lower in the mattress, Caroline didn't know how she'd get out of this situation.

He was right about one thing. Her body was exhausted. She felt herself slipping into a dreamlike state, her thoughts on that animal who seemed lost and hungry.

Almost as if it were looking for a home.

Like her.

Jack made her stay in bed all day, bringing her a breakfast tray and indulging her later with a sandwich and home-made soup from the café down the street. He spent his evening on the chair in her room, reading with the help of a bedside oil lamp.

She began to giggle.

He looked up. “What’s so funny?”

“This morning I watched as an animal, I’m almost sure it was a dog, who got into our backyard and chased the chickens from here to glory! I was worried about the chickens getting killed but in all honesty, it was a sight to see.”

He grinned. Then a look of worry crossed his brow. “An animal you say?”

She nodded. “It looked like a giant dog. At first I thought it was a wolf, but since I never saw a wolf close up, I am not able to say for sure.”

“It may be the wild dog that is causing havoc and terror all over town. Seems it keeps stealing food. The townsfolk want the Sheriff to do something.”

“Do something? You mean kill the poor thing?”

“It appears so. No one can catch the animal.”

Caroline worried her bottom lip. She felt the slight tinge of a pounding in her forehead. It caused her to close her eyes shut.

That quickly, Jack was by her side. “Caroline, are you feeling ill?”

She tried to nod but knew the pain it would cause. This headache came on so suddenly, it scared her. She didn’t want Jack to see what happened if she had a fit. “I believe so,” she whispered.

He moved his chair to her bedside, gathering her hands in his. “I want you to keep your eyes closed and listen to me. Focus on my words.”

She wanted to speak but he told her not to. “I’ve been reading up

on this all night and this evening. I'm going to douse out the lantern. We will be in the dark but I don't want you to worry. You are safe with me."

"I know," she whispered, the pain centered in her temple and forehead.

He returned to his chair after getting rid of the bright lamp. "Complete darkness is supposed to help, Caroline. I'm sure you found this out. I have some oil I purchased at the mercantile. It has some oils that will help to calm you. I've poured a few drops in the palm of my hand. I'm going to massage them around your head and neck, starting with your temples."

It was a strange thing to do, she supposed and yet the moment he placed warm hands on her face, she breathed in the scent of lavender and swore it began to do its job. The pressure of his fingers against her skin began to relax her stiff neck muscles, the ones that had been screaming in agony a few moments ago.

"I think it's working," she told him.

"Focus, Caroline. Don't speak, it may start up again. You need to be completely still."

She listened to him because he was right. The longer he massaged the oil into her skin, the more relaxed she became. The intruding headache was a dull thud now. She had always listened to her body, knowing the moment she was about to have a migraine and would remove herself from the public so no one would see her fits afterwards. At least she didn't have to worry this time. Her body wasn't going to throw a fit any time soon.

She lifted her hand to cover one of his. "I'm alright now, you can stop. I don't deserve all this attention."

Jack leaned down and kissed the back of her hand. "Of course you do. Why would you ever think you didn't deserve to be healthy and whole?"

She didn't answer him. He hadn't stopped with his hands when she asked. He kept digging his fingers into her skin, causing her to drift off in the middle of their conversation.

A smile played on her lips.

A light brush fell across them.

“Goodnight, my darling Caroline.”

The door closed once again as footsteps softly carried through the second story bedroom. “Goodnight Jack. Thank you.”

Caroline drifted off, feeling so lucky and yet so ashamed.

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There were no chickens chattering or feathers flying when she looked out the window the next morning. A lone dish sat at the gate, empty, dropped from the jaws of a very naughty dog.

Caroline hurried down the steps, anxious to retrieve the bowl. She heard Jack speaking to a patient in the front of the house where his offices were. Hoping he didn’t catch her out of bed again, she moved quietly to the back door, determined to see if the dog was still around.

Picking up the empty bowl, Caroline placed a hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun. The chickens were on guard, hiding in the far corners of their pen, expecting the dog to hurl himself upon them again.

Except Caroline had a good idea this dog wanted more of her oatmeal. She hurried inside to get the cook stove going. Pouring oats in the bowl, she repeated yesterdays preparations to make a hearty breakfast for the strange homeless dog.

Trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to disturb Jack and his patients, she took the prepared bowl outside, adding even more oatmeal this time.

Stepping back inside, she stood at her place behind the door, peering out. Five minutes went by before she watched the magnificent animal jump over the fence, the dogs graceful limbs landing perfectly on the ground.

The dog looked right at her, as if it knew she was there. He glanced once or twice at the chickens huddled out of sight before picking up the bowl in its strong jaw. If the dog tried to jump back over the fence, the bowl may empty on the ground.

“I swear you know this,” she told the animal, slowly making her

way out, taking one step at a time until she reached the gate. Caroline was careful to open the gate without making any noise, holding it there while the dog stood frozen, on guard, his tail stiff as a board.

"Go on, scoot," she whispered. It moved slower this time, as if deciding she was no longer a threat. After all, she was feeding him. Or was it a her? Caroline let it pass by, noticing the little pouches on her underbelly hanging down.

She was in awe. The animal was a female and most likely a mother. Caroline was pretty sure this homeless dog was scrounging for food to feed herself to provide for her babies. It made sense how she stole food all over town, disappearing from sight the moment she had some food. The next time the dog came by, she would follow to see where the puppies were hidden. Perhaps she was able to help.

The next day she swore the dog knew she planned to follow. After Caroline set the bowl down, as she was moving inside to her regular hiding place, the dog leaped over the fence, snatched the bowl of food and waited patiently while Caroline opened the gate to let her out.

The dog kept looking back, a careful eye on Caroline even though she stayed at a distance. Then, suddenly, as if she knew what Caroline was planning, the dog disappeared so fast she had to hurry to keep up.

It was no use.

As she rounded the corner, the field ahead and to each side stood empty. The tall grass, the color of wheat and honey, swayed in the distance, no dog in sight.

There had to be another way to find out where she kept her puppies. Caroline was more worried the puppies were left alone too long while the mother was out scrounging for food. Another wild animal may try to devour them. It would be a shame for the mother to come back to find her puppies gone.

Chewing her bottom lip, she slipped back inside the gate, moving slowly across the yard. Tomorrow, Caroline planned to befriend the dog.

Another day and evening being bedridden was beginning to work on Caroline's nerves. She begged Jack to let her resume her role as his wife but he would not allow her to do anything that may trigger

another migraine.

“I’m sorry, Caroline, I insist you stay in bed. Doctor’s orders.”

She let out a heavy sigh.

He looked up from his research once again. Closing the book he was reading, Jack made his way to her side. “I’m sorry, Caroline. I truly am but I don’t want something awful to happen. It appears no one has really taken the time to find out why you are getting these atrocious migraines.”

She took his hand. “I do appreciate your concern. I will promise to listen.”

He laughed. “Now, Caroline. Do you mean you will listen before or after you spend time outside in the yard with that mongrel that keeps wanting to be fed?”

Caroline blushed. “I’m caught then?”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. However, as your doctor and husband, I have allowed it to go on. I suppose no harm can come of doing a good deed.”

He smiled then, causing that dimple to deepen. Her husband was such a handsome man. When he looked at her with a smile that lit up his face, she wanted to be his wife in every sense. Except she was worried any type of excitement may cause a fit. She was not going to let it happen in front of him. Not until they got the migraines under control.

She wasn’t about to have her husband commit her to an asylum even if he was a forward thinking doctor of medicine. Caroline needed to be sure without a shadow of a doubt she was able to trust him with her life.

Chapter 4

Caroline spent the next week and a half feeding the strange creature. The dog wasn't as timid as before, wanting to high-tail it out of there the moment Caroline got too close. Every morning she'd take the food out and leave it at the gate until her little mother dog came for breakfast.

These last few days had been interesting. The dog now trusted her enough that Caroline was able to pet its fur. She was careful not to be too demanding so it wouldn't run off. The dog had even allowed Caroline to follow behind her a few blocks down the back alley when she left, zig-zagging behind several buildings to hide. The dog would run ahead of her right before stopping to make sure Caroline caught up. When they got closer to the field where Caroline had a hunch the babies were hidden, the mother disappeared out of sight in the high grass so fast she had to turn back before Jack realized she was gone.

Sitting at the small kitchen table with her husband, she let out a happy sigh. Her head was feeling much better. Even though Jack hadn't gotten to the bottom of these headaches yet, he was corresponding with a physician specialist in Philadelphia about her symptoms. Until then, he was limiting her time out of bed. She was allowed to work beside him in the kitchen making breakfast, even though he knew she had already been feeding the animal. He didn't know she had followed it down the back alley. If he knew, she'd be forbidden to go outside at all.

"How's the mutt today?"

"She's not a mutt. I do believe she is a full bred dog of European descent. I've done some research you know. You have a library of wonderful books in the parlor that I've been reading during my lazy

days stuck inside."

Jack stuck a forkful of food in his mouth. "Is that right?" he said between bites. "What did you learn?"

Caroline sat up, happy to indulge the information. "I believe she is a sheep-herding dog. I read about them in one of your books from an author who has categorized hundreds of breeds since the early days." She shrugged. "I've had nothing better to do since I am not allowed to do anything physical." Her last words landed on a sour note, causing Jack to frown.

He took her hand in his. "I'm sorry, my darling Caroline. It's for the best. As a doctor, I must insist you rest until we find the cure or culprit of these intimidating headaches. I've watched how debilitating they are for you. I want you healed and healthy again."

She closed her eyes. He was truly a wonderful man. "I want that, too. It's just, well, it's terrible this is how our marriage has started out. I am truly horrified I can't be a true wife to you."

He patted the top of her hand, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "Now, now, don't fret. I'll tell you what. I think it will be okay for you to make dinner tonight. How's that for a start?"

Caroline smiled. "Truly? I would love to cook for you!" She shot out of the chair, pressing her lips against his in a tender kiss. "Thank you, my dear husband. I'll make you the best dinner ever!"

"I'm afraid the pantry needs restocked. Why don't I close the office for an hour at noon and take you to the mercantile. I think some fresh air may do you some good instead of being inside these stuffy walls hour after hour."

"I'll be dressed and ready to go at noon on the dot!" Caroline hurried away, wanting to wash up and get dressed in one of her gowns instead of the night dress she had been wearing lately.

Two hours later she paced back and forth in the parlor, waiting for the doctor's last patient to finish. When she saw her husband come through the door with a grin on his face, she wanted to run up to him and give him a big kiss. Instead, she held back, acting the lady she was raised to be. "I'm ready to go," she told him.

He shed the coat he wore while working and slipped on a light

jacket from the hook alongside the front door. Holding out his arm, the two went out into the bright sunlight. Caroline lifted her face to the sky, breathing air deep into her lungs. “This is wonderful.” Even though she had already gone outside this morning to follow her stray dog down the alley, she hadn’t had much time to breath in the luxurious air then. She had been trying to find the puppies and not get caught by her industrious husband for leaving the back yard where he wasn’t able to monitor her headaches.

A smile played against her lips.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

“I’m having happy thoughts about someone, Jack.”

He pulled her a little closer. “Anyone in particular?” A brow rose as he looked at her with a teasing grin.

“Perhaps.”

“You keep this up and I’ll soon be able to release you from being home bound.”

She turned to him, stopping dead in the middle of the street they were crossing. “Truly? Maybe it’s you that is keeping these headaches from recurring?”

He lifted a hand to her cheek, running a thumb over her jaw. “As a husband I am highly complimented. As a doctor, there is an underlying issue we need to discover. I should be hearing from my associate in Philadelphia very soon. Let’s hope it’s all good news.”

They continued to cross the street.

“Good afternoon, Doc Hart, Mrs. Hart.”

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Mast. Enjoyable day, isn’t it?” Jack tipped his hat. Caroline wasn’t too familiar with Mrs. Mast except for the fact she was one of his patients who had paid him with their wonderful chickens out back. The sweet woman had a family of eight children she needed to feed. Her husband had left months ago to hunt and trap and hadn’t returned yet. He always left her with an abundance of food, but with so many children there wasn’t much else in the way of paying for things So, she had no other choice but to pay with chickens when one of the children got sick.

“It is a wonderful day! Please, you may call me Miss Sheila. Mrs.

Mast makes me feel like the old woman who lived in a shoe. I read that tale to my children the other night. I'm starting to feel like I am the lady from the story!"

Caroline turned to her, realizing Miss Sheila was feeling overwhelmed. She understood the same frustration. "Never! You are a godsend, my dear. Our deal Lord has given you an abundance with those wonderful children and what a gift you have to be blessed and able to take care of them the way you do."

Miss Sheila cracked the biggest smile. "Why, thank you, dear. What a nice thing to say. I guess I am much needed for these children. By the way, I saw that dog again in your back yard. She seems like a friendly mutt, even if half the town wants to shoot her."

Caroline didn't realize anyone else knew about the dog. "Shoot her? Truly? She is coming around. I feed her each morning. Before long she will be the friendliest dog in Mill Ridge."

"Thank goodness someone is feeding her. I was hoping that was the case. Those chickens look inviting to a starving animal. What did you name her?"

Caroline shrugged. "I hadn't thought of a name."

Miss Sheila shook her head, her hand moving to her hip. "She has to have a name."

"We need to go, Caroline. I only have an hour before I must open the office again." Jack nudged her to end the conversation.

"Thank you, Miss Sheila. I'll certainly think about a name. Good day."

The two women turned to go in the opposite direction when Miss Sheila quickly turned. "Wait! What about Millie?"

"Millie?"

The mother of eight nodded. "Yes, it's perfect! She is now a part of Mill Ridge, what a better name than Millie!"

Caroline grinned. "Millie, it is. Good day, Miss Sheila."

She turned to Jack as he shook his head back and forth. "I find myself more amazed by you every single day, my darling Caroline."

"Get used to this, husband. I'm just getting started to amaze you."

They laughed together as they entered the mercantile. Caroline

shopped while Jack inquired about any new telegrams from Philadelphia. Afterwards, they stopped at the small café to enjoy a quick bowl of soup and fresh bread before heading back to the doctor's office.

After a long afternoon, Caroline had prepared a simple dinner for the two of them. Jack insisted she take it easy since they had been out and about today.

"I'll tuck you in and read to you. Would you like me to read to you?"

"It would be a pleasure to hear you read, Jack."

He pulled the chair beside her bed and began to read a poem by Edward Lear, The Owl and the Pussy cat. Caroline laughed at the adventurous tale, enjoying the story even if it was originally meant for a child. Jack was dear to read it to her as if he knew exactly what it took to make her relax and smile.

She reached for his hand when he closed the book. "Thank you. I adore you."

He leaned down to kiss her forehead. "As I adore you, wife. I am afraid I don't have too many light-hearted books to read. Most are stuffy medical journals in my library."

"Anything sounds wonderful as long as you read to me." A blunt headache was trying to form at her temples but Caroline willed it away. She didn't want to suffer with pain this evening, not after Jack worked so hard to calm her before she went to sleep. Besides, she wouldn't allow it to form and cause her to become bedridden again. Jack was now allowing her up and about more. She had to find those puppies before something awful happened to them.

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on her breathing. After a bit, she heard him move away, taking the chair with him to his favorite spot beside the dresser. A small flicker of light burst behind her closed lids when Jack lit the oil lamp. He was careful to be quiet as he moved around the room before settling himself back onto the chair.

Caroline dared a peek at her new husband. Concentrating on the words of the fat book opened up in his hand, he didn't notice her watching him. A lock of dark hair hung over his brow. She wanted to

go to him, to tell him she'd be his wife in every aspect of their marriage and yet a small, distinct pounding behind her eyes kept her from getting out of bed. It was better this way. She was cursed with these headaches and fits.

Maybe the townsfolk of her small town near Boston were right. Maybe she was a witch and didn't know it yet.

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Jack's intense hunger to find what he was looking for in the medical journal had him hanging over the edges of the book between patients. He was engrossed in a thick book about the brain. It was difficult to get through but today there was a lag during the late morning hour without any patients at all. He sat down at the desk in his office, staring at the words on the page.

Epilepsy. Excessive nerve cell activity in the cortex of the brain.

He stared at the page.

His finger followed a path across the page. *When a grand mal seizure occurs, a person will lose consciousness and begin to drop as a loud cry is forced through the vocal cords. Another type of seizure, called a petit mal, also causes a person to lose consciousness. They will either have a long stare or rapid blinking, chewing movements and facial or eyelid muscles may jerk rhythmically. They can last anywhere from several seconds to minutes.*

Jack realized in that moment the sound that had come from upstairs the night of their wedding had been from a seizure. He would bet his medical degree he was right.

He also realized she knew when it happened. His darling Caroline was having seizures after her headaches and knew the signs well. Her reasoning to get away so no one found out was recognized clearly now. His wife wasn't being honest with him. As a doctor, he knew there was an underlying reason why she had not told him about the seizures.

Fear.

As a husband, he was frustrated and angry. He had poured over

medical journals for weeks trying to find a cure for these recurring headaches. It now became a more serious situation. If she'd been honest, it may have saved him hours of agonizing over the pages of these crude journals.

One of his weekly patients knocked on the door, directing his attention away from the journal. "Good morning, Mrs. Smith. Come in."

The elderly woman struggled with her cane. She was already tipsy this morning. She liked to imbibe for breakfast, lunch and supper. She'd fallen down and bruised herself more times than he could count on one hand. Last week she had sprained an ankle.

Jack sighed. He'd have to sit her down again and warn her about the dangers of drinking too much whiskey at her age. Another lecture was in order. Mrs. Smith had lived to a ripe old age but she was pressing her luck here of late.

So was Caroline. She needed to come clean about her seizures but Jack feared she had hidden them for so long she was too scared to reveal the truth to him. Why hadn't her parents done something about this? He knew it was his duty to speak with her and get to the truth.

Except he went through the next three days unable to do so. Caroline was happy, her smile brightening his day after long hours of work. Her headaches seemed to have simply disappeared and yet he knew at any time something may trigger them to spark and cause a seizure. Her tales of Millie each night was surprisingly sweet and he looked forward to hearing all about her day. He had been reluctant to have the discussion.

As a doctor, he needed to get to the bottom of her illness. He had sent another telegram to Penn's Medical School where a colleague of his taught neuroscience. If anyone would be able to give him some answers on what to do, it was his old friend, Thomas Rowling.

Thomas had gone on to specialize in neurology as his sister had been born with a brain defect. Even before they spent time in medical school together, Tom, as everyone called him, had devoured journal after medical journal to find out what had happened to his sister. He had become an expert in everything to do with the brain and the

nervous system. He now worked at the teaching hospital in West Philadelphia.

Jack would watch his wife carefully in the meantime and note all her signs and symptoms until he heard back from his colleague. Sooner or later he knew he had to confront her and meanwhile he prayed for no seizures to happen. She seemed to relax more these days, not getting herself upset. Jack did notice if something didn't trigger her she didn't complain about any headaches.

Was it possible her stressful situation may have been the root cause? Was she now able to live a stress free life and be free of these debilitating migraines? She had a terrible migraine on their wedding night, a time of joy for most and yet it was all the stress of the day that ignited her headache.

Except it was no cure, keeping her from stress as it was bound to happen sooner or later. He had to face the fact she needed to go to Philadelphia to be tested by specialists in this area of expertise. Jack had received a telegram this morning with an urgent request to bring her for testing. He now had no choice but to confront Caroline.

It could very well save her life.

Or, it may send her to a sanitarium. There wasn't enough study and research done yet on her situation. Epilepsy was so misunderstood. Those in and out of the medical field sentenced a person to be locked away, never seeing daylight from the inside of an insane asylum for their own protection.

Jack slid a hand across his brow, pushing the lock of dark hair back. He stared out the window for the longest time, knowing in his heart he would leave here in a heartbeat if word got out about her medical condition.

He would not let any one of these townsfolk threaten to lock her away and he wasn't about to hide her from the world.

A sudden chill went up his spine. Wasn't he already doing so? Keeping her bedridden for all these weeks out of the public eye?

Jack closed his eyes in shame. He was a fool. As a doctor of medicine, why hadn't he seen what he was doing? While trying to protect her, he was doing the same thing her parents had done. Hide

her away from everyone. Except, in this case he was determined to find a cure or a solution. Her parents had done nothing.

Jack needed to close shop and buy two train tickets to Philadelphia.

Today.

He would speak to Doctor James and Nurse Ellie to see if they wouldn't mind checking in on his patients while he was gone. He supposed James and Ellie would understand his justification to go all the way to Philadelphia to have her tested. It was the only place he knew of where they understood nerve and brain disorders. Which meant he had to risk telling someone about her condition. As a doctor of medicine, James would have no choice but to keep quiet about a patient's condition. He had taken an oath to protect. Jack would make sure of it.

Jack flipped the sign on his door to closed as he changed jackets and proceeded to the mercantile to send another urgent telegram. He was going to have to travel to Wichita Falls for the train tickets which meant leaving Caroline alone.

He didn't trust her to be alone and certainly didn't trust anyone else with her. This was a delicate situation.

Yet, before he was able to do anything he heard barking so loud it caught his attention.

Jack turned back to see Millie on his front porch, barking like a mad dog. She paced back and forth then placed her nose on the front door, trying to push it open.

He would have turned and gone into the mercantile if the dog hadn't shown signs of distress, which Jack was good at recognizing. Making his way back to his house, he called out her name.

"Millie, what's going on? Are you looking for Caroline?" Jack pushed open the front door but the dog didn't try to make its way inside.

It kept running off the porch and back on, as if it wanted him to follow. "Wait here, I'm going to get Caroline."

Jack took the steps two at a time, knowing Millie was upset about something. Her loud barking gyrated on his nerves. He had more important things to do besides worrying about an upset dog. A stray

one at that.

Caroline's bed was made so he worked his way to the back yard, where she most likely was. He knew she liked to try to get some sunshine and spend time with Millie. Except Millie was here, barking like a crazed animal, trying to urge him to do something. "I don't know what you want from me, girl."

Millie had come around the back. She leaped over the fence, pacing back and forth, her voice getting louder and more urgent. Her nose pushed at the gate.

Jack was concerned. He ignored the dog. Caroline wasn't in the back yard, either. He ran back inside, hoping she was in the parlor reading but she was nowhere to be found.

A cold fear encased his whole body. Had she defied his orders and gone across the street to the boarding house to visit Robbie while he was gone? They had become friends from the moment the proprietor visited every morning on her routine visit to collect eggs. He had only walked down the street a bit and would have certainly known she left the house since it was fairly quiet this time of the day.

Millie had followed him inside. When he stared long and hard at the dog, she was still pacing, barking at him, trying to tell him something.

It occurred to Jack in that moment Caroline had been curious about the puppies. Had she followed Millie out of the gate to see where she had kept the puppies?

Jack ran across the street to the boarding house to make sure Caroline wasn't there. When Jack turned away from the front door of the boarding house, he realized Millie had to be the only one who knew where Caroline was. There hadn't been time for her to go anywhere else.

Was his hunch right? Had she followed Millie and something had happened?

Jack ran back inside to collect his medical bag. "Millie, show me where she is," he urged in a grim voice.

He swore the dog knew what he said. Without another look back, Millie took off down the dirt alley as he followed close on her tail.

Chapter 5

Caroline knew she was in trouble. She tried to sit up but failed. Her whole body, every limb and muscle was on edge from her weakened state. The exhaustion was too much. Realizing she was alone out here in this field, a cold fear registered in the back of her mind but she was not able to force any part to move.

She was lying on the ground. Caroline felt the blades of long grass underneath her dress. A pulsing light shot across her closed eyelids as worry engulfed her whole being. She tried to push it aside knowing it would be better if she didn't get upset.

The well-known signs of a fit were coming on strong. These were the ones her parents had hated the most because it wasn't a one time occurrence but several in a row.

An uneasy, anxious discomfort hit her from head to toe, a feeling she knew all too well. Caroline begged her mind to relax even as her body tensed, unable to stop what was about to happen.

Her beloved friend Millie began to slide a wet tongue across her face in an attempt to calm Caroline. She heard her husband's voice in the background, it sounded so far away.

"Caroline."

She was unable to focus her eyes on him but knew he was there, standing above her. There was no time to wonder or worry what he would say. Millie plunked down, fitting her warm body tight against Caroline's side. It was so comforting. She wanted to reach out and touch the soft fur but her hands would not allow her because they began rapid jerking movements she was unable to stop.

All Caroline was able to do was let it happen. She had learned at an early age if someone tried to hold her down her situation became

much worse. Her parents had found it out once, causing her a sprained shoulder. After that incident, when she had a fit they had walked away, slowly closing the door, leaving her alone for hours until she recovered on her own. Those times had been lonely, terrifying experiences.

“Caroline, you can get through this, try to force your body to relax. Get rid of any bad thoughts.” His voice was so close, it sounded like sweet honey to her ears. Wasn’t he afraid she was a witch after seeing how her body betrayed her?

There was no way to hide it any longer. Now he knew her secret.

Rapid bursts of electrical energy began to attack her whole being. Her body was no longer under her control as it thrashed on the ground once again. Yet, in the back of her mind she heard her husband’s voice sing like a soft melody. She wasn’t able to tell him she heard him. The soothing sound of his voice made her feel as if she wasn’t going through this alone. The feel of soft fur against her skin was what she tried to focus on.

But her physical self had a mind of its own. One that didn’t include any help from Caroline.

Before long, the fit was over. Her eyes were focused on the soft dark fur that had felt so nice against her body. The cries of hungry puppies drifted in the empty recess of her mind even as they climbed over her to get to their mother’s side. She was in a world of her own, unable to speak, unable to let her husband know she was fine now. There was no room for anyone or anything else in this horrible place. Her head knew there was comfort once it was over. Until then, she’d be alone in a spiralling world out of her control.

A hand held hers. It was large and warm and she knew somewhere in her lost mind it was her husbands, which made her smile, even if he wasn’t able to see the smile cross her face.

“I will take care of you, my darling Caroline.”

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Salem Nightingale sat upon his horse, staring down. They must’ve

been a sight with him trying to shield her body with his own so the sheriff didn't see his wife's condition. Little fur balls were all over her, their tiny bodies exhausted after a much needed dinner. Millie was content to stay by Caroline's side and frankly, Jack didn't mind one bit. Millie seemed to help.

"What in tar-nation is going on here, Jack? What did you do to your wife?" The sheriff slid from his stallion, his fingers sliding towards his gun belt.

Jack frowned. "No need to go for the gun, Sheriff. My wife has taken ill. I'm going to need some help to get her and these puppies back to the house."

The sheriff continued to stare down at the scene on the ground.

"I guess we know why the mutt was in town stealing from folks."

Jack nodded. "Guess so, she was feeding herself and these little fur balls."

The Sheriff kneeled down, picking one up. Millie stiffened, watching him closely as a low growl rumbled in the back of her throat. "They're the darnedest little creatures I've ever seen close up. Wouldn't mind having one for my own."

Jack nodded. "They are that." He hadn't really thought about it until now. The six puppies were sure happy to be lying across his wife's belly while their mommy was tucked tight against her side. He hadn't wanted to move Caroline yet, mostly to make sure her seizures were over.

He had been studying her movements, knowing she was not in harms way as long as he allowed the seizure to complete. Her eyelids were closed after she had stared for the longest time, her body movements came to a stop some time ago.

He doubted she was coherent enough to be able to tell him anything. It was why he wanted to study her body movements afterwards. The experts in Philadelphia would want to know.

That's when Salem rode up, interrupting his study. It probably didn't look good from his point of view. "Why is your wife lying on the ground apparently in distress and you are doing nothing to help her?"

He shook his head. “It’s a long story, Sheriff.”

“I got all day, Jack. Looks like your wife does, too. Is she conscious?”

“I’m afraid not. I will need you to keep this between the two of us for now.”

Sheriff Nightingale rubbed his jaw. “Depends on what I’m supposed to keep quiet about. Seems to me I come upon you hovering over your wife’s body and the dog is protecting her. Even though the mutt isn’t scared of you, I’m likely to think there is something strange going on here.”

“Your likely to find out she was having a seizure. I believe she has epilepsy.”

“A what? Seizure you say?”

He nodded. “It’s a series of currents that run through the brain causing the cells to discharge and render her unconscious.”

“Jeez, Jack, you mean she had a fit? I’ve done some reading myself after Jackson Montana had a brain injury awhile back. You weren’t here then but they said he’d be like a vegetable the rest of his life. Look at him now, he’s fine.”

“Glad you understand. Can you help me get these animals back to my house? I’m going to have to keep them close now so my wife doesn’t try to do this again. I think she is able to be moved now without a chance of a repeat any time soon.”

Sheriff Nightingale scooped up all six puppies. He took off his vest, placing them inside so he could carry them easier.

Jack whispered in Caroline’s ear. Lavender scent from her hair stirred him deep inside his soul. “I’m going to take you home. It won’t be long until you can get some rest. Don’t worry, Millie and her pups are coming home with us.” As he picked her up, careful not to disturb her, he noticed her arms hung limp by her side as he walked back up the alley. She wasn’t aware of any of her surroundings.

The Sheriff followed behind, the pouch of puppies in one arm, his horse’s reins in the other. Millie walked right beside him, constantly looking up. Jack grinned as he listened to the Sheriff trying to reassure Millie the puppies were in good hands.

“Look, mutt, I know they are your puppies but we got to take care of them for now. Stop growling at me every darn time I look at you.”

Jack laughed. “I doubt she understands you, Sheriff. Millie’s being protective of her babies, as any mother would be.”

“Millie? That’s an interesting name.”

“I believe it suits her, especially since she now belongs in Mill Ridge whether she wants to be here or not. I doubt my wife will let her live out in a field somewhere once we get them to our house. I believe I just inherited a sheep-herding dog with a litter of pups. The chickens will not be happy.”

Salem nodded. “Since I’m using up most of my day carting a bunch of puppies around, I am hoping to have first pick of the litter.”

Jack grinned. Salem tried to act tough as the sheriff of Mill Ridge but he obviously had a soft spot for little puppies. His large hand kept patting the top of their little heads whenever they peeked over the top of his vest. “Let’s wait and see what my wife has to say, even though I’m sure she will want to find good homes for them.”

Salem agreed. “Christmas is only a few weeks away. They’d all make fine gifts for a few good families here in town.”

Jack walked through the gate, pushing it aside with his knee. The back door was still wide open. “I’m going to take Caroline upstairs. Can you find a spot in the corner of the kitchen and block it off with some wood from out back? I’m not sure what to do with the little critters.”

“Don’t worry, Jack. I have an idea.”

Jack didn’t pay much attention after that. He realized the animals were in good hands. Millie stayed right by the Sheriff’s side as he arranged the kitchen to house her puppies while he took the stairs two at a time with his wife in his arms.

She hadn’t stirred the whole way back. He had placed soft kisses on her brow to let her know he was here, unsure if she was aware of anything at all. He did it deliberately because he planned to question her when she got through this. Had she felt him at all placing kisses on her skin? Was she aware of any conversation going on around her? These were a few of the questions that needed answered so they were

able to give a good report when they reached Philadelphia.

It was more imperative now to get her on a train and seen by someone at the teaching hospital. If this had happened in the middle of town, folks would not think too highly of someone having a seizure. No one understood.

He had seen it happen several times at the teaching hospital right before a young woman was sent to an asylum by her stern father. The father hadn't given them a chance to diagnose the medical problem. Was Caroline afraid he'd send her away, too?

He covered her with a soft blanket, placing a hand to her cheek. "I won't let anything bad happen, my darling Caroline, I promise. I swear we will find a cure together. No matter the cost." As he leaned forward to place a kiss on her cheek, she stirred.

"Jack," her whispery voice called his name. "I am sorry."

"Don't be," he told her. "It's not something that can be helped. You rest, we'll talk later." She was already asleep when he felt her steady breath against the side of his face. He stayed there for another few moments, listening as she expelled soft gusts of air from her lungs. Her body was exhausted, her mind more so. It may be days until she came back from this episode.

Jack went down the stairs to find Salem sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of hot coffee in his hand. "Hope you don't mind, I made you a cup, too."

Jack reached for the cup. "Thanks. For the coffee and helping out." He turned to Millie, who was now curled up in a corner of the kitchen, her babies making soft sounds as they fed. Her head was flopped against the cool floor but Millie's ears were perked up, as if on alert.

He sat down across from Salem. "I'm not sure what to do with them," he mumbled, running a hand across his dark hair.

Salem shrugged. "Not much you have to do. The mother will take care of the little ones until they're ready to be on there own."

"I can't have them inside the house. They'll make a mess."

Salem drained the rest of his coffee and stood. "I'm not sure what is going on with your wife but as far as I'm concerned, you are a good man Jack. I'll take you at your word there is an issue here that needs

tended to and trust you to do so. I'm going to the saw mill to fetch some boards to box off an area for the puppies. That should keep them all together. It won't keep Millie in though."

Jack stood, holding out his hand. "Thanks, Sheriff. I appreciate the discrepancy for now. I need to head to Wichita Falls tomorrow to purchase tickets to Philadelphia. My wife needs to be seen by someone who specializes in the matters of the brain and nervous system."

Salem nodded. "Not a problem, Jack. I'll go fetch your sister at first light tomorrow. She can stay with your wife while you run your errands. As a matter of fact, I'll ride along with you."

"Thanks. I'll need to head out early to speak with James and Nurse Ellie. They'll need to come see my patients while I'm gone."

Salem headed out the door. "They've done it before, suppose they can handle that without a hitch. We're all here for you, Jack. Mill Ridge appreciates your part to make this town better. Most folks are glad to have a doctor as fine as you."

After Salem left, Jack sat on the rocking chair in the parlor, staring out the window. Folks were hustling down the street on their way to their own homes now. It would soon be Thanksgiving day but he knew they would not be here to celebrate with the others.

Jack hoped their business in Philadelphia would conclude long before Christmas. He was looking forward to spending the holidays here in his new home with these townsfolk who enlightened him every single day. It would take about four days to reach Penn Medical Hospital. There, he would get to the bottom of his wife's sickness.

Standing up, he stretched his long legs, taking the stairs two at a time. He wanted to check on Caroline first. She was fast asleep, her face drawn and pale. Jack poured some water into the basin on the night stand, dipping a cloth into the cool liquid.

After wringing the cloth out, he pulled a chair beside her bed and gently wiped her brow and face. She stirred. "Don't worry, Caroline, it's me. Your husband."

A shaky hand reached out from under the blanket.

"What is it?" Jack leaned closer as her whole body tensed. It was going to happen again. He prepared himself mentally, trying to push

the thought she was his wife to the back of his mind. He needed to be her doctor right now.

"Caroline! I'm here." Her hands thrashed in the air while her eyes opened wide, an empty stare knocking him back a step. When she looked at him like that it was apparent that some folks would be scared. Had her own parents been afraid of their own daughter?

As a doctor, he knew it was something out of her control. He let her ride it out, talking to her the whole while, waiting until she settled down again.

A quiet fury spread through his whole being. There had to be something to give her to keep the attacks from happening. How was he going to get her to Philadelphia like this?

"Jeez, this is bad." Salem stood at the door, apparently seeing the whole episode, staring at him now as if he'd seen a ghost. It was unsettling to watch, even for the toughest sort.

"I'll be down shortly."

Salem disappeared from the doorway while Jack watched her body movements and facial expression go through yet another seizure. Before long it was over, her body stiff as a board, her facial expression non-existent.

He ran a palm through his hair, puzzled. He scooped up his medical journal that sat on the dresser, opened as if waiting for him to read more.

He studied the words, page after page, trying to find something to give her so the electrical spasms would settle down.

He sighed, finding nothing.

Downstairs, Jack was overwhelmed with defeat, a feeling he never experienced before except the day his twin brother had died. He held two boards together while Salem pounded a nail into the sides, forming a pen for the puppies. It would keep them close to their mother and safe from getting lost if Millie went out exploring.

Twice Millie had climbed the stairs to check up on Caroline. The dog stood at the top of the stairs, as if listening. When all was well, she'd go back down and settled in with her pups.

Jack had watched her, amazed and glad he was keeping the

puppies safe. He bent down to scratch Millie's ears. "You saved my wife. You will always have a home here."

Salem agreed. "That's a good mutt. The puppies aren't so bad either."

"Thanks for your help, Salem."

"You don't have to ask twice, Jack. This town needs you as their doctor. I've heard nothing but good things about you as a doctor and man."

"Much appreciated, Salem, but I need to get back upstairs to sit with Caroline. This may be a long night."

"Can you give her medicine for those seizures?"

He sighed. "I'm afraid I don't know what to give her that will help. If she gets the wrong thing, it may trigger the seizures the wrong way."

Salem stared. "Try something for Pete's sake! Either way, the seizures are happening. It may help."

"You're right. I'm acting like a scared, spineless husband instead of a doctor of medicine." At Salem's urging, Jack went to his office, unlocking the door to his pharmaceutical cabinet. He pushed around bottles and tins, looking for the right medication that would at least calm her enough so she could rest.

"This."

Salem read the label. "Tincture of opium?"

"It's strong and dangerous if not used properly. Wait." Jack reached back in his cabinet, pulling out another bottle with reddish brown liquid. "In this case, I think laudanum will work better. It's not quite as strong as the pure opium tincture, even if it has some included. Let's find out if it helps."

"What do you plan on doing, Jack?"

"I'm going to try the laudanum first, it's milder. I'm going to give it to her while we travel to Philadelphia, hopefully keeping any future seizures at bay. We should know in the next few hours if it helps."

As Jack went back upstairs, he knew he had to be careful. He had read many cases where a patient had gotten used to taking laudanum for their pain. After some time, their dependence on the tincture grew

and they were never the same again. Caroline had enough problems without more.

“Caroline, you’re awake.” Jack leaned over the bed, placing a kiss on her forehead. It was warm and sweaty but he didn’t care.

“I’m afraid things didn’t go well for me, did they, Jack?” Her words were no more than a whisper.

“I’m afraid not, my darling. It’s okay, you’re safe now. What do you remember?” His curiosity grew as he placed the bottle on the bedside table and took a chair at her bedside.

She drew in her breath causing the brow on her forehead to crease. “I don’t recall anything before waking up to stare at the sky. Then I knew you were there even if I wasn’t able to see you. I felt Millie by my side.” Her words made her smile, albeit weakly.

“We will always be there for you, Caroline. Always.” Millie stuck a warm nose from somewhere over the side of the bed as if she were agreeing with Jack. She nudged Caroline’s hand until a smile played across her face.

“Millie. I guess you’re ours now,” Caroline told the dog, patting her head softly. Millie must’ve sensed when Caroline woke up. Jack had to give her that, she was keen and had ears that heard the slightest sound.

Jack gave his wife a warm smile. “Guess it’s so. No one seems to have claimed her. I think she’s taken a liking to you.”

Millie sniffed around for a moment before her ears went erect. She dashed out of the room so fast they both laughed out loud. “Salem is downstairs with the litter of puppies. Guess Millie didn’t plan to leave them in his hands for long.”

Caroline tried to sit up but Jack had to help. “You’re still so weak, Caroline. Don’t try to move.”

“Oh, dear Jack, don’t baby me so. I’ve been down this road many, many times. I’ll be fine.”

Jack sat back down on the chair. He needed to have this talk.

Now.

He knew she was embarrassed that he watched her have a seizure. “Caroline, I’m concerned about the seizures. I found you in the middle

of one. I thought it was over but the moment I put you in bed, another one started."

She closed her eyes. "It does that sometimes. There's no particular pattern, Jack. I'll leave if you want me to."

He took her hands in his. "There is no reason to leave. We will get to the root of this, I promise. It's time to go to see a doctor of neurology in Philadelphia."

She laid a hand on his cheek. "I don't want to go to an asylum. What if the doctor in Philadelphia doesn't know what to do? I've been labeled a witch in my home town. My father sent me away in the middle of the night as a mail order bride so I didn't have to be put away or killed. I'm truly afraid to go back east. What if they force you to put me away?"

Jack hadn't realized everything she'd gone through. "Darling, I won't allow this to happen. I am your husband and have the final say. No one, especially a doctor of neurology that believes in the science of medicine would ever threaten to harm you. You'll have to trust me on this."

She leaned back against the pillows. "I want to trust you, Jack. I truly do."

Chapter 6

Caroline knew Jack meant well but she was not feeling herself right now. Her mind seemed fuzzy every time he gave her a spoonful of laudanum. He had told her it was to keep her relaxed enough so the seizures didn't come back during the trip they planned to Philadelphia.

The medicine relaxed her so much she was unable to do anything at all. For the past two days she had stayed in bed, her mind bogged down and fuzzy.

Caroline knew whenever Millie stopped by for a visit. She felt the dog's nose against her hand each time. "Hello, Millie. Thank you for stopping by." She'd tell Millie this every time she came in to see her, which was every few hours. Caroline heard faint sounds from the kitchen. The puppies were starting to make a lot of noise.

Jack had told her he'd brought them home and would keep them safe, which made her feel so much better. Since Christmas was so close, she was hoping to give some deserving families a precious puppy to add to their family.

By then the pups would be ready to leave their mother. What would Millie do then? She was such a good mother it made Caroline smile.

"Is there a secret you are hiding from me?" Her husband had entered the room while her thoughts were on Millie. She hadn't heard him come in.

"I was thinking about Millie being alone after the pups have a new home."

Jack sat down on the edge of the bed, taking her hand in his. "Don't worrry about anything right now. By the time we get back

from Philadelphia, you'll be better and we can find families for all of them. I think Millie owns us now."

"Are you certain I'll be better, Jack? I feel like such a burden. Look at what you have gone through already."

He sighed. "Caroline, you are my wife. It is my duty to take care of you and as a doctor I am going to find a cure for these debilitating seizures. Our trip to Philadelphia where the best doctors can help will be the best thing for you, I promise."

She tried to squeeze his hand but her strength was still gone. Or, maybe it was the medicine he had been giving her. It made her feel incoherent most of the time. "I'm not sure I feel fit enough to travel."

Jack reassured her. "Remember what I said, Caroline. I've given you some medication to keep your body and mind relaxed. I still believe stress is a large factor to these seizures. As soon as we get to Philadelphia, I will decrease the dosage a little every day. You will probably feel a bit out of sorts until then. Don't worry, I'm taking care of everything."

She smiled, a little lopsided because it felt as if one side of her face went the opposite way. Then she giggled, causing Jack to grin.

He kissed her forehead. "At least you will be happy the whole way on the train."

"When do we leave, Jack?" Not that she cared, she was fine lying here in bed, as long as she didn't have to move often. Her body and mind were in bliss right now even if she realized it was the laudanum that made her feel so light and airy.

"We'll be going to Wichita Falls in a few hours to catch the morning train. Lily & Ben Sloan reserved a room for us at their hotel. Sheriff Nightingale secured it for us while I went to the depot for our tickets."

She tried to pat his hand but failed. "He's been a good friend to you, Jack."

"That he has. He's gone out of his way to make sure your condition has been kept out of the public eye. It's not that I don't want anyone to know, but you've seen for yourself how folks react."

"I sure have. Thank goodness your sister is like you and reassured me she will keep an eye on Millie while we are gone."

“How was your visit with Annabelle today?”

She smiled. “Thank you for sending for her while you went out of town. We had a nice visit. Her husband Grant came to pick her up, pacing back and forth downstairs while we waited for your return. He was anxious to get your sister back home.”

Jack laughed. “Grant had been out on the range until he heard she left the ranch. He’s so overprotective since she is with child.”

“Annabelle thinks it is darling. I’m glad she was here. She is the one who taught me to be proud of myself. I learned a lot from her when I first arrived here.”

“So have I. We should get going. Sheriff Nightingale is going to check on the pups and Millie while we are gone. Doctor James and Nurse Ellie will be here twice a week and the other days Annabelle is going to send Elizabeth’s oldest boy, William, to check on things. There will be no need to worry about the animals.”

“Even the chickens?” Caroline giggled again, knowing they didn’t need anyone to check on them.

“Caroline, you are being silly. Come now, let’s get you up and ready to leave within the hour. I want to get to Wichita Falls before night fall.”

An hour and a half later the two were in a buggy bound for Wichita Falls. Caroline was getting a bit hungry. She hadn’t told Jack she hadn’t eaten all day but he figured it out when her stomach growled. She was so busy talking with Elizabeth she hadn’t touched the prepared lunch her friend brought along.

“First thing we do is take you to Jenna’s Cafe. I bet a good hearty dinner will stop that noisy belly of yours.”

“Sounds delightful,” Caroline told him with a smile of her own. She seemed to smile a lot these days. “I may need some more of the medicine if we are going to be out in public.”

Jack frowned. “We will see, Caroline. Don’t go getting too used to having this. We’ll distribute it as I see fit. I am monitoring it to make sure you stay relaxed, but I don’t want you to get too used to the euphoric feeling.”

Caroline made a face at her husband. She didn’t think he saw her

but his cheek began to twitch so she laughed out loud. “I see you, Mr. Jack Hart. You know you want to smile.”

He did then, turning to her with eyes filled with pure adoration. “I feel good about this trip, Caroline. I think it will make all the difference in the world. The world of medicine is always changing, this I do know.”

Caroline patted his hand, feeling a bit more like herself. He hadn’t distributed any of the laudanum to her since earlier today and it was wearing off. She was able to see more clearly now. “You are a good man, Jack.”

He placed an arm around her, holding onto the reins with the other. Caroline was content to lean against him while enjoying the ride along the widening path.

More and more traffic was flowing into Mill Ridge from Wichita Falls these days. A thought struck her that someday the two towns may get so large they would merge together to make one giant city. How wonderful it will be to have all the resources of both towns a fingertip away. It would never happen during her time, she was sure, but maybe for her children. That is if she was ever able to have any.

Looking up, she stared at Jack’s profile. Did he want a normal wife? Children? Was she even able to have children with her medical condition? So many questions left unanswered. She planned to speak to the special doctors in Philadelphia herself since they were experts in this field. She wanted more than anything to have Jack’s sons and daughters.

“There you go, thinking again.” He pulled her tighter.

“You must be able to read my mind.”

He shook his head. “Nah, not at all. You get a look in those beautiful eyes. What are you thinking about?”

She smiled. “I can’t tell you, Mr. Hart.” He had enough on his plate without knowing she was worried about being able to conceive.

He laughed. “Perhaps I need to tickle it out of you.”

She giggled. “That’s silly, sir. I’m not ticklish at all.”

“Ah, we will see, Mrs. Hart.”

The crest of the ridge came into view. As the wagon rolled along,

Caroline enjoyed the scenery. She loved the open fields and the lovely waterfall that led to the town of Wichita Falls. As they passed the boarding house, Miss Addie stepped outside, waving when she realized it was Caroline and Jack. An older man walked up the path to greet her, a lone flower in his hand.

"Well, would you look at Miss Addie. I believe she has a gentleman pursuer."

Jack had tipped his hat at her old boss. "None of my business," he mumbled, guiding the wagon towards the front of the large hotel.

"I suppose you are right."

Caroline had seen the hotel from the front porch of the boarding house but never had a chance to go inside. It was the most decorated building and tallest in Wichita Falls. As they entered the lobby, she admired the beautiful décor, along with local paintings and wall hangings from residents in town. Their names were proudly displayed in small plates under each picture. There was even a children's section on one side, with inspiring watercolor paintings.

A beautiful woman with dark hair and a long flowing red dress practically danced towards them. The smile on her face was infectious, nodding at her husband. "Doctor Hart, welcome." She took Caroline's hands. "You must be Mrs. Hart. I'm sorry I never stopped by the boarding house to meet you before but I've tried to keep track of all the ladies who were spared from that horrible man. Some days it gets rather busy here but I want you to know I am so happy you are a neighbor." She spoke quietly so other guests didn't hear their conversation about the time long ago when all of the brides were kidnapped.

Caroline smiled, taking an instant liking to the lady in red. "Thank you for giving us a room. We have a long trip ahead of us."

"I have some good news that I can't reveal as of yet, but go get settled in your room, have some dinner at Jenna's Cafe and when you return, I have someone who wants to meet you both."

Caroline watched Jack's brows rise. As they made their way behind the porter who took them to the second floor, she was stunned at the beauty of the place. "This is so gorgeous. The wood floors, these

banisters, how did they do this?"

"Not sure, Caroline. Let's drop our things in here and go have some dinner. I'm anxious to know who wants to speak with us later."

"You didn't know?"

"I hadn't arranged any meetings with anyone."

Caroline took a deep breath, filling her lungs with air. "I'm nervous. Should we worry about this meeting?"

"Not at all," he reassured her, placing a kiss on her cheek. "Come along, let's go get some food." He patted her hand in a gesture that told her without any words it was not in her place to worry.

Jenna's Cafe was quite busy. A small line had formed outside. Jack and Caroline didn't have too long a wait and before they knew it, a table was empty for them right inside the entrance doors.

"This is lovely, Jack. I am so hungry."

"No need to starve at Jenna's Cafe," a young voice said. The young lady came up to take their order, promising to bring a bowl of soup so delicious they would never eat anywhere else again.

"We are on our way to Philadelphia."

The serving girl laughed out loud. "I hail from Philadelphia, this is indeed a small world. You must make sure to have a soft pretzel while there. They are so delicious."

Caroline perked up. "Just where will we find these soft pretzels?"

"Oh, anywhere there is a street vendor with a cart. The insides have thick centers that are so chewy you will cry out loud." Her giggle turned a few heads, but she ignored their stares.

Caroline grinned at her husband who gave her a reassuring smile. He had been worried about her for so long, since the day he found out about her headaches. He was enjoying their banter. It was actually one of the few times she watched him relax for a few minutes.

She knew this trip wasn't easy for him, knowing there may not be a cure for her migraines. No man should have to put up with a wife who wasn't able to function. If this venture proved worthless, she would not hold him to their marriage vows. It was the right thing to do.

Caroline closed her eyes and prayed before taking her spoon and digging in. Even though she was thankful for the food in front of her,

she wanted more than anything to have her husband's hopes and dreams come true. They needed a cure for her maladies. Philadelphia seemed to be the answer to their prayers. *Please God, let the doctors find a cure for these migraines and fits. I place all my trust in you. Ease my husband's heart, help us both to come back home healthy.*

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"I'd like to introduce the two of you to Mr. and Mrs. Martin."

Caroline and Jack were sitting in the library across from their hostess, Lily Sloan. She wore a huge smile as her hand waved to the two guests when they entered the library.

Caroline was slower than Jack to react but in her induced state the words tumbled out. Jack had given her a small dose of laudanum right after dinner. "Why, they are so small!"

Mr. Martin took his wife's hand as they stopped short in front of Caroline and Jack. He held out his little hand to her husband, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor Hart. I hear you are a great asset to Mill Ridge."

He turned to her. "Mrs. Hart, It's a pleasure to meet you as well and this is my lovely wife, Mrs. Martin."

Caroline smiled back at him. He was a jolly, pleasant man with an infectious demeanor. Mrs. Martin took both her hands, pulled her close and gave her a huge hug. "Hello, Mrs. Hart. I hope you find your new accommodations to your liking."

Caroline was puzzled. What did she mean? She looked down in the other woman's eyes. "We will be staying here only one night but I'm sure it will be very comfortable."

The woman smiled, her cheeks rounding out with a slight blush. "I don't mean the hotel, I mean our surprise for you and the doctor."

"Pray tell, what surprise?"

"Well, if Mr. Martin will let me oblige, I'll tell you." After a nod from her husband, she squeezed Caroline's hand. "When we came in on the morning train, Miss Addie told us of your plight to go to Philadelphia."

Fear tried to sneak its way inside of Caroline's fast-beating heart. These two were total strangers and they knew about her malady? How did they know? She turned to her husband. How did Miss Addie learn about their plans so fast?

As if he knew her thoughts, Jack tried to reassure Caroline. "Remember I was in town with Salem yesterday tending to our business? Of course, I let Miss Addie know the reason we had to go to Philadelphia. She's the one who suggested we get a room at the hotel here until the train leaves."

That still didn't explain why these strangers knew her business. She turned back to the woman. "Go on, Mrs. Martin."

"Well, dear, my husband is a wealthy man. We plan to visit here for a few weeks over the holidays and now that Miss Lily is having a Christmas Ball, our plans to spend the rest of the year here have been secured. Which means Mr. Martin's private train car will be sitting on an empty track, not being used."

"I'm starting to understand this conversation," her husband piped up.

Caroline frowned. She didn't know where this was leading. She tried to smile at the woman. "I'm glad you do because I'm totally confused."

The older woman patted Caroline's hand. "No need to be, dear. Mr. Martin is kind enough to loan you and your husband his train car to get to Philadelphia and back. All the arrangements have been made with the rail road here and a telegram has been placed for when you arrive in Philadelphia." She leaned closer to Caroline to whisper in her ear. "My husband is very influential. He knows important people everywhere. You don't have to worry, he's found you a hotel to stay while in the big city."

Caroline was shocked! Why would these folks, rich or not, do something so wonderful for the two of them? They'd never even met before. It must've shown on her face.

Mr. Martin spoke up. "Now, Mrs. Hart, I know you must be thinking that we hardly know you. I've come to love Wichita Falls and the people that live here. If you are a part of these people's lives, then

you are considered family in my opinion. Family helps family."

A tear ran down Caroline's cheek. Her parents had never said anything like this to her, ever. Everyone she had thought who cared about her turned away when they saw the terrifying fits.

Her husbands arms held her while she tried to pull herself together. "Thank you, Mr. Martin. No one has ever been so kind before."

"Well then, clearly our kindness is much needed here."

"It certainly is, thank you, sir." Her husband shook hands with Mr. Martin before helping Caroline up the stairs to their room.

Inside, Caroline began to feel giddy. A small thump began behind her temple. Was she getting herself riled thinking about her family and how they had pushed her aside?

"Caroline, are you getting a headache?" Jack immediately picked her up, placing her on the bed. He propped pillows behind her back, speaking in his monotone voice to keep her calm.

He gathered her hands in his as he sat beside her on the bed, telling her to think of the puppies and how they make her smile. Caroline grinned. "Just yesterday, one of the pups got away from Millie. I watched as she picked it up by the back of its neck and marched it back to the whelping pen. The little feisty pup did it three times before Millie put a stop to the runaway by shoving a teat in its mouth."

Jack laughed out loud. He tilted his head. "I think talking about other things took your mind off the headache, didn't it? I don't see the tell-tale look on your face."

"Perhaps you are right. The laudanum keeps me calm. It helped me to relax. I no longer feel any signs of a headache. Am I cured, Jack? From laudanum?"

The look on his face told her the truth. "I'm afraid not, but it is helping for now. At least having a private train car will keep you out of the public eye. I won't need to give you as much of this medicine. I worried it would be too much before."

Caroline realized just how much he had been worrying. She placed a shaky hand to his cheek. "I'm sorry, Jack. I'm afraid you are bogged down with an ill wife. I wish it were different."

He took her hand and kissed the back of it. “I wish it were, too, but it’s not. This is our life and we will make the best of things, no matter the outcome of this trip. I hope you realize this, Caroline.”

“What are you saying, Jack? I can’t burden you the rest of your life with my problems.”

“When I took on the responsibility of being your husband, I took on every single thing about you. I won’t let you down. I know others have in the past but it’s time to let all that go and forgive them for their ignorance. Including your parents.”

Another tear slid out. “Thank you for saying these wonderful things. Let’s take one day at a time.”

“I mean every single word, Caroline. I take my vows seriously.”

“I do mine, also.” Except she knew in her heart if there was no hope for her condition, she would not hold him to any of these promises. It wasn’t right. He needed a good wife, one who would take care of him, not the other way around.

“Well, then, we best get some rest. The train will pull in right after breakfast.”

Caroline went to sleep that night, praying for a miracle.

Chapter 7

"I'm feeling fine, thank you." Caroline was starting to get annoyed at her husband. As kind and loving as he had been this whole trip, she knew he was concerned about her seizures and headaches but he kept asking her the whole way to Philadelphia if she was feeling alright.

Even though she had reassured him, there was a look of concern on his face. He was sitting in one of the separate arm chairs staring out the window, a frown wrinkling his brow. She was in another chair facing him, feeling fine and yet a bit fuzzy from the laudanum.

She was also a bit annoyed that he had cut down on her medicine since they'd been alone these past few days. There was no need to take so much, he had said.

Every so often, the Martin's private porter, Mr. Jonathan, came to announce their meal was ready. They would sit at the table and wooden chairs at the far end of the private car, relishing in the delicious food while watching the landscape scenery rush by. The rest of the time the porter had disappeared somewhere else on the train. It was nice to have someone do all the work of cleaning their private car and serving meals.

The jolting of the train was not as bad as Caroline feared. Whenever the train stopped at a station, they would get out to stretch, which helped immensely until the cry of *All Aboard* reached their ears.

The first two days of their trip, Jack had insisted she take a spoonful of laudanum on a regular basis. Yesterday he had given her much less and now today she wanted a dose but he had refused. He had told her not until after dinner but she wanted more.

"Are you certain it is wise to cut back on my medication?"

He turned away from the window. "Yes, it is, Caroline. I know you want more but it's not the answer. We should be arriving in

Philadelphia shortly. The doctor there is our answer, not a bottle of tincture."

His voice was sharp. She knew better than to argue even if she wanted. He was her husband and her doctor. He knew what was best. Yet, if she was careful, perhaps she would be able to take a small swig from the bottle when he wasn't looking. After all, it would only help keep her headaches at bay until the doctors here got a chance to see her.

Her reasoning to herself was distracted by the steam engines coming to a slow crawl. Buildings were now seen from their window, bigger and much higher than she'd ever see in Wichita Falls.

A faint voice was heard in the distance. "New York Junction!"

"Wait right here, Caroline. I'm going out to make sure the Martin's private car will be secured before the train leaves again."

The moment Jack stepped outside, Caroline got up and made her way to his jacket, which hung over the chair he had been sitting on. He hadn't put it on when he left. She knew the bottle was in that pocket. She'd seen him take it out whenever he gave her a dose.

She held a shaking hand across her mouth. Dare she steal from her own husband? Was it really stealing? He had been the one to give this to her in the first place and then he wanted to cut her back! How awful was he to keep it away?

Didn't she have enough issues without one more? Why, he had told her the laudanum would be good for her so her headaches would diminish.

A hand slowly reached for the jacket. She fingered the pocket where she knew held the magic potion that made her feel better.

Her face fell. If she took a dose of it without his permission, she'd be a liar and a thief, along with an ill wife who wasn't able to function on her own.

Instead of reaching inside, she placed both hands across her face, covering her eyes. Her shoulders shook. She was not going to ruin the trust between them. Not now, not even for a dose of this medicine that made her feel better the moment it reached her belly.

"I'm proud of you, Caroline."

He stood behind her. She turned and fell into his arms. “I’m so ashamed at what I was going to do.”

He cupped her face in both hands. “No, Caroline, don’t ever be ashamed. This is what happens to people who rely on laudanum to cure their ailments. It is a temporary fix but never solves the problem. I’m sorry I have to force you to take it.”

“I want some so bad, but I want your trust even more.”

“You have it. After what I witnessed, you are so strong, you will overcome this, I promise. I’ll do whatever I can to help you.”

“Well, then, give me a teaspoon of laudanum.”

He threw his head back and laughed. “Sorry, but no. Come outside, there’s a whole new world for you to see.”

They left the train car to step onto a granite side walk. A large two story Queen Anne style structure stood between them and another set of tracks. Gables hung low in order for the passengers to keep dry while boarding and unloading. The station was crowded while many of the passengers got off in the area to catch a Ferry to Camden.

A horse-drawn street car was waiting at the station to take passengers to their destinations. Jack secured them a spot, giving the driver the address of the hospital.

Caroline wanted to go to a hotel and rest but Jack was insistent on heading straight to the hospital. Instead of complaining, she watched the people going back and forth on Broad Street, one of the busiest places in the city, Jack told her.

Belgian blocks paved the narrow streets of Philadelphia. As the horse and carriage traveled away from the center of the city, Gothic and Victorian style mansions lined the streets.

Caroline was amazed at the impressive buildings. “I’ve never seen homes like this before,” she said, pointing to the mansions.

Jack shook his head. “They’re built by wealthy industrialists and old money. Most times a physician will be called to their homes to take care of their issues.”

“They are lovely.”

Here we are.” The carriage slowed to a stop. Jack helped her out and paid the driver.

Caroline pointed to the brick building. “Penn Hospital,” she read out loud from the large sign near the entrance. Jack took her by the elbow while they proceeded to the entrance by way of a circular drive. A large three-story Colonial brick building stood towering over them while a statue of William Penn hovered at the entrance.

The moment they walked inside Caroline felt overwhelmed. It was a huge structure with twin staircases ascending to a floor made of Portuguese tile. She looked around, finding two large fireplaces in the lobby, along with several wooden sconces on the walls that provided heat in the large area.

A few small signs lead the way to other rooms of the building. “Where do we go?”

Jack chuckled. “I’ve been here many times, Caroline. Don’t worry. Let’s take a tour before we visit the Department of Nervous Diseases.”

“Is that where you are taking me?”

“Yes, eventually. This is where I spent a lot of my time while studying to become a doctor. I’ve observed many surgeries in the operating gallery here.”

“Well, show me around your wonderful hospital, Doctor Hart.”

Caroline and Jack made small talk as they climbed the staircase to the second floor. Large paintings hung on the walls, lining the staircase with those philanthropists who helped donate to the hospital. “The men in these photographs are all wealthy men who felt the urge to give to the poor man’s hospital. It was kind of them to do so. We’ve been able to accomplish much with their monetary help.”

A large court on the second floor was accommodated by a plush library filled with medical books of all kinds. They continued up to the third floor where a surgical amphitheatre stood.

“Would you like to spend a moment in the gallery and see if there is an operation going on?”

“Are we allowed to?” Caroline had never seen anything like this before.

“We can until we get booted from the room.” They opened the door to a gallery that encircled the operating room, which was occupied by several physicians in long white coats. Caroline and Jack tried to stay

as quiet as possible until she saw what was going on in front of her.

A man was on a gurney in the operating room surrounded by several nurses and a doctor. The small crowd wore white. One of the nurses spoke up. “You have your choice to ease the pain, Mr. Charleston.”

“What are my choices,” a frail voice asked.

“Rum, laudanum or we can use a mallet to tap your head to dull the pain. Which will it be, sir?”

He mumbled something incoherent while Caroline stood watching alongside her husband. The man had chosen laudanum. She recognized the bottle when the nurse picked it up.

“I don’t believe the two of you belong in here.”

“Drats, we got caught,” Caroline whispered. She found this whole medicine thing fascinating and didn’t want to leave yet.

Jack had her hand and pulled her along to stand beside the other doctor. “I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with me for a bit longer.”

The doctor’s raspy voice got louder. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle! Jack, it’s good to see you again!”

“Shh,” one of the other doctors in the room ordered.

The older man nodded at the two so they left the room. Outside, Jack introduced the man to her. “This is Thomas Rowling, head of Nervous Diseases. Thomas, my wife, Caroline.”

Thomas held out his hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. Let’s move on to my ward, shall we?”

The two men talked while Caroline walked behind them. It was hard to place one foot in front of the other. This was now about her. In a short while, she would know if the rest of her life would be plagued by horrible headaches and seizures or if there was a cure. Even though they came halfway across the country to find a cure, her body began to fear the worst.

A small tugging at the back of her head stopped her short. The men hadn’t noticed she wasn’t following. They seemed to get further away now, her husband and his friend a dark shadow against the whiteness of the corridor.

She dropped to the floor, knowing what was coming next. There

was no point in standing there until it came upon her like a river's dam bursting forth.

Her husband looked back, a large smile on his face, no worry lines across his brow until he turned and began to run towards her. She wanted to stop what was coming next yet was powerless to do so. At this point, the seizures were out of her control.

He knelt down, taking her hands, then letting go, picking her up from the ground, unwilling to allow anyone to see her like this. She was grateful and yet there was no way to shut it off.

The man who stood beside her husband opened a door. As they entered the room she had a faint smell of lavender cross her senses, calming her down and yet it was too late to undo what had begun to start.

The moment Jack laid her on the large table, her body movements began. She saw the electric currents, felt them slashing like a bolt of lightening in her brain. Her hands and arms along with her legs began their routine of jerking back and forth out of control. The look on Jack's face was horrifying.

In that moment she saw a man, fearful for his wife and angry that something like this was taking control. He spoke to the other man, while they both observed her like she was on display. Unable to communicate, she wanted to shout at them to stop staring.

Yet, in the back of her mind she knew in order for the doctors to help her they had to see what they were up against.

After a few minutes, the lightening and currents stopped as quickly as they had begun. Her body, exhausted beyond belief, caused her brain to begin to shut down. Caroline remembered staring at the doctor, the one who nodded to her husband as if he understood what had happened.

It was funny how unfocused she had been before she had met Jack. Now, she was in her own head, watching them observe her, unable to talk and yet waiting for this monster to release her from its grasp. She was more aware of everything going on around her since she had met her husband and yet anxious as well. Right now, it was too much though. She needed to sleep.

Her husband began to whisper in her ear, his soothing tones calming her body right down. She wanted to reach out, to touch him but yet knew her limbs failed her.

“The doctor gave you something to sleep now, my darling Caroline. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

He was true to his word. It seemed as if days had gone by but Jack told her it was about eleven hours. She was in another room, one with a large window that allowed her to see the large buildings lining the streets of Philadelphia. The window protected her from the noise of the city and yet it was relaxing to watch people walk the side walks and street cars filled with passengers going back and forth.

“Caroline, Thomas wants to have you sleep awhile longer. We are going to give you something more to sleep for a few days while he studies you and runs some tests. This is why we are here, but I want to make sure you are acceptable of these terms.”

She had the energy to nod, then opened her mouth while he gave her more medicine. It didn’t taste quite like the laudanum her body was used to. It had a stronger taste and seemed to work more quickly.

Right away, her mind became fuzzy while her body relaxed. She saw her husband fading away, the light outside no longer in her room. The door opened. Her bed was being moved by several nurses. She heard the clickety-clack of wheels that needed oiled go down the pure white corridor.

Before she knew what was happening, they were in a room where all she was able to see were white walls and ceiling. Caroline looked for her husband but didn’t see him anywhere.

Caroline tried to smile. It was going to be alright. Somehow, she knew her prayers had been answered.

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Caroline wanted to open her eyes until she heard several nurses talking about her. She tried to stay as still as her body allowed. They were fixing her bed linens while washing her face and neck.

“Poor thing, didn’t she know it was against the law to get married.”

“I’m sure she wasn’t aware people with this condition are forbidden to marry. At least here in Philadelphia. I’m not sure about the wild west. I heard anything goes there.”

Another nurse stepped into the room. “What are you three talking about?”

“Our patient here has the Falling Sickness.”

“Isn’t she married? Well, at least her husband will be able to annul the marriage.”

“I’m certain he has no plans to do so. Doctor Hart dotes on his wife.” The youngest nurse chimed in after listening to the others.

“Humph, that may be how he feels right now but after living with her for a long time, he’ll become tired of it. Won’t surprise me if he sends her to the Hospital For The Insane west of the city.”

The younger nurse snapped. “Why don’t you take yourself there, Anna? What you said isn’t nice. Lucky for you Mrs. Hart can’t hear you.”

Caroline tried hard to keep silent. Was that how Jack would feel if there wasn’t a cure? She was torn between loving a man with all her heart and keeping him from ruining his life. Slowly the others left. Caroline opened her eyes to find the young nurse there, the one who had reprimanded the others.

She jumped when realizing Caroline was awake. “I’m sorry you had to hear the conversation. They truly thought you were sleeping.”

Caroline shrugged. “It’s the truth of the matter. Why put this on my husband. Even my parents wanted to place me in an asylum. I was lucky to get away.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. I heard the doctors talking. There is modern medicine that may help your problem. Let them do their job before you jump to any conclusions.”

“What’s your name?” Caroline was curious to know who this young lady was. She seemed smart beyond her years.

“It’s Penelope. Most of my friends call me Penny.”

Caroline forced a smile even though she was feeling pretty down right now. “It’s a beautiful name. Thank you for sticking up for me.”

“You are welcome, Mrs. Hart.” She turned to face Caroline. “I’m

going to become a doctor, you know."

"Are you now? That's an intriguing profession to become a woman doctor." Caroline wondered how in the world a young lady like her would stand up to the cruel men of this world. It was not too common to see a female doctor. Jack had told her stories of how the men drilled the women and made them feel inadequate.

"I know what you are thinking, as so many others do. But just so you know, the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia of 1867 is now the Medical College of Philadelphia. Do you want to know why?"

"Yes, of course."

"Because we allowed men to join in 1870. I'm going to be one of the students as soon as I am accepted."

Caroline smiled. "With your determination, I'm sure you will become one of the finest doctors Philadelphia has ever seen."

"I don't plan to stay here. I'm going West, to find a place where I belong."

Caroline agreed. "It's a wonderful place. I am hoping to get back there soon, along with a husband who will not throw me to the wolves, so to speak."

Penelope shook her head. "Oh, please don't listen to those old nurses. They have one way of thinking and it's always negative. I see the way your husband looks at you, his eyes filled with love and adoration. I am hoping to find the same thing after I become a doctor for a growing pioneer town in the wilds of western civilization."

"Well, good for you. Does my husband really look at me the way you say?"

"Of course he does." Jack had entered the room, hearing the last of their conversation. Caroline squealed with delight when she saw him.

Sitting up, she didn't realize Thomas was in the doorway. "I am falling deeply for you, dear husband."

Jack grinned and moved aside so Thomas was able to step in the room.

Caroline blushed when she realized what she said in front of this famed doctor of neurology. Her hand slid to cover her mouth.

"No need to be embarrassed. My wife is the same way," Thomas

told her. “I especially love when she runs up to the front door and throws her arms around me to find I have a staff of five right behind me.”

“Oh dear, that must be embarrassing, I’m sure.” Caroline finished sitting up, tired of lying in the bed. “Have you found a cure yet?”

Thomas Rowling turned to her, his face serious. Even though he was teasing her about his wife a moment before, she saw a hardness to him. He would be honest and forthright, she was certain.

Jack stood beside the bed, taking her hand.

“I’ve studied your seizures and after doing several tests while you were asleep for the past two days, I’ve come to the conclusion that -”

Caroline squeezed her eyes shut, afraid to hear the rest. Her husband was clenching her hand as if he were just as nervous. For a doctor, his movement was not too reassuring.

“Bromine,” he concluded.

Caroline hadn’t heard a word after he said he came to the conclusion. “Bromine?” She noticed Jack’s grip had lessoned. Her fingers were no longer numb.

Thomas grinned. “Relax, Mrs. Hart. You too, Jack. Your face is so pale, as if you were about to get the worst news ever.”

“I was not nervous.”

Even Caroline laughed at the look on Jack’s face. She squeezed his hand back. Either this bromine was a miracle or she was heading to the sanatorium. “What is bromine, Doctor?”

“For now, I do believe it will help curtail your seizures. I’ve been experimenting with other patients with the same type of epileptic seizures. So far I’ve had good results. I’ve patented a mixture of bromine and other tinctures I will discuss with your husband since he has the medical degree.”

“Will it cure my seizures?”

“I’m afraid I can’t answer that, Mrs. Hart. I want you to take this medicine for two days and enjoy the city, tour the sights. Let Jack take you to see this wonderful place we call home. If, after two days your seizures are lessened, I will consider it a success for now. I will want to see you in one year from today.”

Caroline was disappointed. She didn't want to come back here again. "You want me to come back here?"

He nodded. "Yes, by this time next year we are hoping to have developed some other testing that will advance the science of neurology. Right now it is being tested on some animals with wonderful results."

Caroline would take what he offered. The medicine was bitter tasting but he told her after the two days of letting it work through her system, she'd most likely only have to take it once per day.

"Jack will monitor your results and send them to me every few months. We will see you back here next September."

"That's it, then?"

"I'm afraid it is, until we can be more certain, this medication is all we have to keep seizures at bay. I do know by next year there will be more to offer."

Jack's relief tugged at her heart while they walked through the narrow streets of the city. A peddler offered some delicious soft pretzels that the young server at Jenna's cafe had told her about.

She had been right. They were deliciously thick and chewy. "I wish I could box these up and take them home with me."

Jack laughed. "I'm afraid by the time we got home they'd be hard as a rock. They are good, I'll grant you that."

For the next two days, Jack and Caroline visited several places in the city, including the Penn Medical School where Jack got his doctor's degree.

On the evening of their trip before they were due to go back, Jack told her he'd like to drop her off at the hotel and visit his brother's grave site.

"I won't let you go alone, Jack. I'll go with you."

He gazed at her with love. "Are you certain? I do believe the bromide tincture is working well. Thomas released you from his care for now but I don't want you becoming upset at anything. Are you sure this won't upset you, Caroline?"

"It would upset me if I didn't come along with you to the grave yard."

“Very well, then.” He held out his arm for her while they took a casual stroll towards the Christ Church Burial Grounds. Sitting on the Southeast corner of Fifth and Arch streets, the two walked through an iron gate in search of his brothers tombstone.

She stood back while he knelt at the grave site, quietly grieving for his twin. Her heart ached while he placed a hand over the name carved into the stone. Finally, as if sensing he needed her, she stood behind him with her hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

He stood and gathered her in his arms. “I feel as if a part of myself is in the ground. If only he had listened to me.”

“There’s a bench over there if you’d like to sit awhile,” she told him, taking his hand and leading him towards the cement structure. He needed to grieve, she was certain.

The both sat, side by side while Jack told her about his twin, how their sister Annabelle took care of them when their father died. He told her how his sister worked to send the two to medical school and was so proud when they were both accepted.

“My brother went a year with no problem until he met a man who was able to convince him he could earn twice the amount of a doctor without all the hard work. Sad to say it ruined him. My brother died because he was trying to betray a bad man. No good came of his life.”

Caroline wanted Jack to forgive. It was the only way to free his soul. “Jack, I do understand how you feel. It would be easy to blame my parents for what they didn’t do. Yet, I love them with all my heart. I’ve chosen to leave the place I was born, sneaking out in the middle of the night like a coward and yet I didn’t want to die.”

Jack laid his elbows on his knees, leaning forward, staring at his brother’s grave. “I don’t know why he died and I didn’t.”

“Oh Jack, please don’t speak that way. You are here because I need you. The whole town of Mill Ridge needs you. Your brother chose his journey. Yours is different.”

Chapter 8

*J*ack hung his head. He was torn between believing her words and sinking into the negative energy his brother's life had always caused him. Jack didn't want to be here any longer, he needed to get away from the gloom surrounding them. "Let's go." He stood up, holding out a hand for his wife.

"Jack, go to that grave and tell your brother you forgive him. Do it for you, not him."

Caroline was fierce when determined. It was one of the reasons he loved her even if he never told her. She was right, he needed to get some things off his chest. A short nod and he turned back to the grave. Taking a few steps closer, Jack stood there, looking down on the stone as if it were a mountain too high to climb.

"Go on," she urged, giving him space yet letting him know she was right there.

He sighed. A hand raked through his hair, causing the corner of dark thickness to plop down over one eye. He went to push it away when a horde of memories came over him. Jack dropped to his knees in the grass. "I'm sorry, brother. So sorry I wasn't able to save you from this." His hand reached out to the stone but all he felt was its coldness.

A warm hand covered his own. "Tell him, Jack. Don't stop now."

"I'm angry. You were always getting in trouble. I covered for you from the time we were little. Pa never saw the despair you caused and Ma was always too drunk to care. Annabelle knew, she tried to encourage you to behave but you kept sinking deeper and deeper. It was good our sister wasn't able to see you in the last few months of your life. I will keep those images from her at all costs."

He felt Caroline's warm hand on his shoulder. She was beside him, kneeling, too. He took her hand in his. "You could have this, what I have, brother. If only you'd have lived a better life. I miss you like I've never missed anyone else. I'm furious you didn't survive. For so many nights I stood here, wishing it was me six feet under the ground. Now, I am the luckiest man alive and wouldn't trade your grave for anything. Not any more. Not since I've found Caroline."

Caroline gasped. He turned to her. "It's true. After he died, I stood here many nights wishing it were me instead. When I came to Mill Ridge to tell Annabelle about our brother, I didn't have a future in mind. Until you. Now I want to live. You are my life, Caroline. You."

Her face grew pale at first. Was she going to have a seizure? He studied her for tell-tale signs. When none came, she smiled and kissed him instead as if he were the only person in the world who mattered.

Jack clung onto her for the longest time. He had needed this healing in his life. As a doctor, he was so busy fixing everyone else. His wife had done this for him. He stood, pulling her up, his arms around her again. The sun was beginning to fade as the city darkened. "We'd better get back to the hotel and pack up. Our train leaves first thing in the morning."

"Did you mean those words, Jack? Even if this medicine stops working? Even if I can't ever get rid of this awful epilepsy? Did I hear you say you love me?"

"Yes, Caroline. I did say I love you! I'm going to shout it to the world right now! I love you, Mrs. Caroline Hart!" His deep voice resonated throughout the small alleys and streets of the city. An echo was heard in the background.

A voice from the darkness shouted back. "I love you, too!"

Caroline giggled at the strangers remark.

"See, everyone loves you!" Jack told her right before he picked her up and swung her around in a circle.

She threw her head back and laughed at her husband's antics. "Can we get out of this graveyard now? It's kind of creepy."

"No worries, wife. I'll protect you from the evil within."

They held hands to walk back to the hotel, as light raindrops from

the evening shower drizzled upon them. Trickles of dampness clung onto her gown as he tried to shield her with his jacket.

They made their way up the steps of the hotel. Jack was so completely happy and free. Free from the burden of carrying the guilt of his brother's death. It had hampered him for so long. Caroline was right, his work needed him. As a doctor, he gave more of himself in the small town of Mill Ridge than anywhere else. The townsfolk needed a good physician, one who wasn't afraid to try new things, explore advances in medicine.

She turned to him right inside the entrance. "Can we eat supper in the hotel dining area?" They had mostly eaten at the hospital or ordered room service. This request was new.

Jack grinned. "Whatever you wish, my darling Caroline. If you feel ready to sit in public then we will." He knew it wasn't like she was at home in Wichita Falls sitting in Jenna's Cafe. This was a huge hotel, the dining area almost filled to capacity. If she were to have a seizure, it would be in front of a lot of people.

And yet she wanted to chance it to have dinner with him.

"I am feeling so much better, Jack. I think I'm ready and this can be a real test. I have the confidence to do it."

"Let's go to our room to refresh ourselves. You will have the best table in the whole dining room!"

His wife laughed as they made their way upstairs. Jack was confident the new medicine had taken effect. For two days there were no signs of distress. Thomas had reassured him Caroline wasn't the only one with seizures. He had other cases even more successful than hers. Thomas was an expert in neurology. Since the early part of the century, scientists and physicians had been working on the nervous system and parts of the brain. They were starting to make a breakthrough. Jack knew he had to be patient.

In the meantime, he would coddle his wife and watch out for her whether she liked it or not. That didn't mean he would keep her locked up inside the house. No, he wasn't that overprotective. He had faith in modern medicine. As long as he made sure she faithfully took the medicine each morning, he didn't think he had to worry as much

any longer. It was a huge relief.

Dinner in the dining area of the hotel went well. They talked so much about their future in Mill Ridge, Jack had no doubt things were looking up.

Since it was rainy outside, they took an evening stroll around the perimeter of the lobby which soon had Caroline yawning. “We must get you to bed, my darling Caroline. It’s been a long week here in Philadelphia, hasn’t it?”

“I loved every moment of my time here with you.” Caroline kissed his cheek, her warm breath against his own. He wanted to do more than a light kiss but refrained. Jack wasn’t sure if she was ready for more.

She backed up a step, her smile so wide it surprised Jack.

“What is it, darling? Why do you seem so immensely happy tonight? Are you glad we are leaving all this?” He spread out his arms and she walked into them.

He looked around the lobby to see if anyone was watching. No one seemed to be paying attention. Caroline looked up, her smile broadening by the second. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth.

Surprised, Jack held her at arms length. “Caroline?”

“You look confused, Jack. I’ve been giddy all day long waiting to tell you this. I’ve been wanting to wait until the right moment.”

“Tell me what? What is it you are keeping from me?”

She giggled. “Doctor Hart, I have some good news. While you were watching a procedure at the surgery amphitheatre I was questioning your good friend, Doctor Rowling.”

“Thomas? You were speaking to him about me? Us? Why, Caroline?” He began to worry, this wasn’t like his wife to discuss things without him.

She twirled around in his arms, laughing out loud. Then she sobered quickly and looked him in the eye. Her one blue and one green eye sparkled with mischief. “When we first came here I was determined to annul our marriage if the doctors were unable to find a cure. Now that we have something to look forward to, a future

together, I wanted to speak to those same doctors about conceiving a child."

Jack raised a brow. "Is that right?" A smile began to creep across his face. His heart pumped harder as she continued.

"That's right, Jack. Dr. Rowling feels confident that I can be a mother someday. He said other women in my situation have had children with out any setbacks. But I was to never, ever miss any of my medicine, no matter what. He'd like me to be cautious at least for another year, but after that, if all seems well, I can have many children."

Jack gazed at his wife. "You are the most beautiful woman to me. I love you, Caroline."

"I love you, Jack. I'm ready to be your wife. Completely. In all ways."

He held onto her. No matter what happened, this moment would play in his heart forever.

The two stood by the window, in each others arms longer than Jack had planned. "Let's get some sleep," he told her, taking her hand as they walked through the lobby.

She leaned in and whispered for his ears only. "I doubt we'll get much sleep, my darling Jack."

When he looked at her face, it was the color of crimson. Jack knew she had been bold to make such a statement as it was totally out of character for her. Caroline had been hidden from the world for so long, she deserved to be a bit brazen, especially if he was on the receiving end.

"Mrs. Hart, Mr. Hart! There's a telegram here for you!"

Jack turned towards the voice behind the desk as they passed by. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, it says urgent."

He read it first, not believing the words on the paper. Jack wanted to crumble it and throw it as far away from Caroline as possible. Instead, he reluctantly handed it to her.

A trembling hand tore the paper from his grasp. "What is it, Jack? What's wrong?"

Caroline's face rendered surprise as she read the telegram. "Why would Miss Addie tell them I'm here? I can't believe this!"

Even though her hand trembled in fear, Caroline didn't panic. "How are you feeling? Any signs of a headache?"

She shook her head as if that were the last thing she was thinking about. "I can't believe my parents are here looking for me. Well, it's too late, we are leaving tomorrow."

Jack ran a hand over his brow, pushing the stray hair back. "Look, Caroline, remember at the cemetery? You helped me get past my anger at my brother. Maybe it's time for you to do the same."

Eyes wide, Caroline stood still, staring at him as if he were the last person she wanted to speak to. He worried for a moment she was going to fall and have a seizure but was reassured the moment her toe began to tap on the carpeted floor. "Jack Hart, I don't want my parents to know I am here. They begged me to leave my home. My parents were ashamed of me. You never have been. You didn't blink an eye when I had a seizure. You loved me through it."

The last words were whispered. Caroline gave in to the tears. He gathered her in his arms, holding her while she finally let the tears drop, unashamed.

Several people exchanged looks as she cried her heart out in the lobby. Jack held her close to muffle her sobs. He guided her up the stairs and to their room before she exhausted herself. Even though the medicine was working, he would probably always worry if she had too much excitement.

After several long minutes, he had tucked her into the single chair by the fireplace. She stared at the flames for the longest time, her eyes now wet from the tears. Jack took a hanky to dry her eyes.

She tore herself away from the light. "I'm sorry, Jack."

"No need, it was time to get your feelings out. I'm glad it happened."

She sniffed. "I don't understand why Miss Addie told them we are here?"

He shrugged. "It says in the letter they had been checking every single matchmaking company from here to California. When they sent

a telegram to her, she told them you were married and happy. They insisted they had to see you, they had to talk to you. So she did what she thought was best."

Caroline watched the flames flicker. "When I left their home in the middle of the night I never expected to face them again. My hurt and anger is still here, right here." She pointed to her heart, which had been broken.

Jack took her hands in his. "Darling, it's time to forgive. This illness is not easy, especially for someone who has no medical background. People in general accuse before they know the facts. Your whole town was determined to hunt you down and destroy your life. Maybe your parents sent you away to protect you."

"They did, I know that but my mother said some cruel things to me."

"All in frustration, I'm sure. Without a degree in medicine, I'm afraid I may have done the same thing. To protect you."

"I want to forgive them, truly I do. I just don't know that I can face them after all the damage."

"Then write them a letter. I'll have it sent to their hotel."

Jack watched Caroline as she sat at the desk in their hotel room, writing a letter to her parents. A tear splashed down her cheek onto the paper. She'd crumble it up and start over. Every now and again, she'd look up to make sure he was there.

Finally, she stood. "This is nonsense. I will face them. Do you have their hotel?" At his nod, she scribbled on the hotel's stationary. "Have this sent then. I'll face them in the morning right before we leave."

Jack didn't hesitate. After having the front desk deliver her note, he went back upstairs to find her lying on the bed, fully dressed. He covered her up and slid beside her. It had been a long day. Sleep came easy this night.

Chapter 9

Caroline stood tall. She had been waiting under the gabled roof of the train depot for over twenty minutes. Jack had stood with her but recently went to make sure the Martin's private car was coupled on the tail end of the train leaving this morning.

She was anxious to leave, more ready to go back home. Home. Mill Ridge was where she would make a life with her wonderful husband. It was where she would raise her children. Mill Ridge had given her a new lease on life. Even Miss Addie, with her busy-body ways, had known she needed to confront her parents.

Caroline recalled she had spoken to Miss Addie about her parents but she never revealed her illness. Perhaps the older woman had known all was not right. She'd thank her as soon as they returned.

Excitement rose up from the bottom of her belly. She did miss her parents. Even if they had a hard time with her illness, had tried to hide it from the world. It had been for her own good. She just wished they'd been more willing to get her the help she needed instead of ignoring there was a problem.

She heard her name called softly. Caroline turned to the voice, recognizing the wispy sound of her mother's voice. She held her breath. The moment she laid eyes on her mother, her body tensed as memories flooded back.

Jack was by her side before she could move. He looked at her parents and then her. "Caroline, relax. You took your medicine, you will be fine."

She nodded. "I know, except my heart is racing out of control." Then she took one step after another until she ran into her mother's arms. Even though the elder woman didn't deserve it, Caroline wanted to forgive. She wanted to leave the burden of anger and hate behind.

She would not take it back with her to Mill Ridge.

"Oh, Caroline, I'm so happy to see you. We've searched all over for you."

"Why? I'm pretty certain you were glad to see me gone."

Her father stood there, stiff and quiet. His head was hung in shame. He spoke up. "Caroline, we realized you weren't insane, that there was something seriously wrong but were helpless to do anything. Then I was confronted by my boss, who had read an article about your condition. We heard there is medicine that will help so we started searching for you, hoping we could somehow get you help."

Caroline smiled. "My husband is here. Jack, meet my parents. He's already taken me to the Penn Hospital and gotten me fixed up. I'm no longer having seizures."

"That's wonderful. I'm so sorry about the way we've treated you," her mother cried. "I ask for your forgiveness. We are so ashamed of our stupidity."

"Oh, mama, I do forgive you. It's hard to understand what happened." She reached for her father's hand. He was the one who insisted she leave and never return for her own good. Caroline knew there was love inside him, he just had to learn to release it in a positive way.

"Father?"

He took her in his arms. "Forgive me, Caroline." Those three words meant the world to her.

"I already have."

A shout was heard from the conductor. "All Aboard! Train leaves in ten!"

Jack took Caroline's arm. "We must go."

She nodded. "Mother. Father. You'll have to come visit soon."

"We will. Soon."

They waved goodbye as she boarded the private car. Jack was by her side, not relenting until she settled herself in the arm chair. From the window, she watched as her parents stood on the platform, arm in arm, watching as the train pulled out of the station.

She turned to Jack, who sat in the other single arm chair facing her.

“Thank you.”

“I love you, my darling Caroline. Are you okay?”

She smiled. “I’m fine. I can’t wait to get back home.”

“In the meantime, we have four whole days and nights to keep each other company.”

Caroline laughed. “Oh, Jack. I love you so much.”

“I’m glad you made things right with your parents.”

“So am I. It feels nice. No more heavy burden to carry.”

Jack agreed. “I felt the same way at my brother’s grave. Thanks to you.”

“Well, then, we can thank each other.”

“I know exactly how to do that, Mrs. Hart.”

She blushed.

He grinned.

It was going to be an exciting ride back to Mill Ridge.

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Caroline got off the train in Wichita Falls feeling like a new person. Her medicine was tucked in Jack’s pocket. For some reason he wanted to make sure she took it each morning so she obliged. If that was the only requirement to keep him happy, then she wasn’t about to argue.

He loved her. She had been thrown away and neglected most of her young life and now here she was, in a town where everyone knew each other and accepted you no matter about the past.

The two began the long walk through town to the livery to get a buggy. “We can stay here at the hotel overnight if you are too tired to travel, Caroline.”

“No Jack, I want to go home. I miss Millie and can’t wait to see how the pups have grown.”

Jack smiled. “It’s only been two and a half weeks.”

“That’s a long time to be away from home.”

“I suppose. I’m anxious to get back to work. Doc James will be glad to be relieved, I’m sure.”

“It was nice of him to cover for you.”

“I’d do the same for him and Nurse Ellie.”

They strolled arm in arm past Miss Addie’s boarding house. She was right there, on the porch, waiting for them. “Did you see your parents?”

“I did. Thank you for the telegram. It was difficult but we had a nice time.”

Miss Addie nodded as if she knew the meet up would have a good outcome. “I’m glad you got to see them. We always have room here at the boarding house or the hotel if they come for a visit.”

Caroline smiled. “Maybe this time next year they will have a reason to visit. As long as this medicine keeps working, the doctors told me we can have children.”

“Oh, how wonderful! My prayers have been answered.”

Jack grinned. “Mine, too. Good day, Miss Addie.”

She followed his lead. “Are you in a hurry to get home?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Oh, Jack. You are so bossy!”

He laughed. “Not bossy enough it seems. Let’s go home.”

The ride took a little over an hour since they had stopped several times to enjoy the beautiful prairie. In the city, there was hustle and bustle and large buildings covering the landscape. Here, the wind stirred the grassy fields that went on for miles at a time.

Jack had stopped twice to pick colorful flowers. Her hands were filled with the wild flowers but she didn’t care. He was a wonderful, caring, loving man and he was all hers.

The moment Mill Ridge came into view, Caroline’s heart began to beat faster. “I missed this place.”

“So have I. Who knew I’d be converted to a small Texas prairie town from a big city and be happy. I had dreams of working in a large institution when I first went to medical school. Now, I’m as happy as a pig in mud.”

Caroline laughed out loud. “That’s a terrible analogy, husband.”

“It guess so. Look, there’s Sheriff Nightingale. He has one of our puppies following him.”

“Does he know?”

“I’m not sure, doesn’t look like it.”

“It must’ve followed him out of the house.”

Jack pulled up in front the of doctor’s house. The closed sign on the front window stood crooked but it made her smile at the look on his face. He was anxious to open up.

When the Sheriff saw them he turned back. Just then he saw the little pup behind him and leaned down. “I told you not to follow me again!” Then he scooped it up and carried it back in his one arm.

“Good morning, Sheriff!” Jack leaped from the buggy, shaking the man’s hand.

“Glad to see you folks back. This puppy here has a bad habit of following me everywhere. I can’t believe he did it again!”

“Guess you’ve got yourself a new member of the family,” Caroline told him.

“This here dog is a pain.” His words ended with the Sheriff patting the puppy on it’s black head.

Jack and Caroline looked at each other. They both knew the puppy had claimed the Sheriff as his own.

Just then Millie came bursting from the house when William opened the front door. “She began to cry and fuss and even banged her head on the front door. I’m guessing she knew you were back.”

Millie leaped into the buggy, causing Caroline to cry out. The dog licked her face until it was soaking wet. “Millie, now get down, girl.”

The dog listened while Caroline got out of the buggy and went to her husband’s side. She took his hand and petted Millie with the other. The dog’s tail wagged back and forth.

Caroline felt proud of her life now. She looked around. Stared at the handsome man she called husband. When Sheriff Nightingale shoved the pup in Jack’s arms and took off, she watched the little black fur ball struggle to get loose.

“I believe he wants the Sheriff,” Jack mentioned.

Jack was right. “I’m going to buy some baskets, tie a red ribbon on the handle and give these puppies a new home for Christmas. The Sheriff gets that one.”

Jack nodded in agreement. “I do believe they’ll be ready to go by

then. In the meantime we have two full weeks to prepare."

"I'm happy, Jack."

He looked at her with all the fondness of a man in love. "Let's go home, my darling Caroline."

"Oh, Jack. I love when you call me that."

He grinned, full of himself as he carried the puppy into the house. Caroline was home for good. She glanced back to see the town of Mill Ridge in the morning hours. Unlike the city, folks mingled before they went on their way, taking time to say hello as they passed each other.

"You coming?" Jack asked, holding the door open wide.

She turned away from the street and followed her husband inside. She was glad and grateful to be home.

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Next up is A Teacher's Treasure.

This is a fun mystery romance treasure hunt story I had so much fun writing!

A Teacher's Treasure

Book #5

Cover by silverheartstudio.com

Dedicated to all my readers who helped find the words that didn't make sense. To Sandy, Debbie, Pam, Susan, Mary Jane, Nancy C., Trudy, Sue, Glenda, Janice, Nathanja, Peggy, Scott & Sheila! You are awesome!

The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.

- Mark Van Doren

Chapter 1

*"T*hat's all the pay I'd get? I know for a fact one of the teachers here in Pittsburgh, a Mr. Reinhold, gets a much larger salary than this."

Her attorney shifted in his chair. "I'm sorry, Miss Williams, you are probably right." He leaned against the leather back. "The fact of the matter is, you are not a man. A female teacher's compensation is a third of what a male teacher gets paid."

Jennie jutted her chin, pacing back and forth across the worn carpet. "Don't they realize it's much more difficult in such a remote place, without libraries or large cities to educate a young person?"

"Sit down, Miss Williams, I'm not on trial here, am I?"

"Humph!" She flopped down on the brown leather chair, frustrated. Even though she had money tucked away, it wasn't fair to be getting a pittance for a job like this. It wasn't even the job itself she worried about. Her reasons for wanting to travel to a small western town halfway across the wild west were personal. Much more personal than anyone ever needed to know. Not even her attorney knew why she wanted so desperately to take the position, although she knew he had his suspicions. She wasn't about to divulge any more information.

"Now, now, Miss Williams. I know you wanted me to negotiate better terms for you, but, frankly, the townsfolk in Mill Ridge have a certain budget to work with, to be honest. They have a town council and after everyone was in agreement, decided the town will fund a teacher for their brand new schoolhouse, which was donated by a wonderful couple from town. Here is the letter I received from them just the other day in response to your request."

He slid it across the dark mahogany desk. Jennie didn't hesitate, but picked up the letter. Scanning the contents, she nodded as if in

agreement even though she didn't agree with the salary negotiations, not that she had much say in the final amount, it seemed. "If I were a male teacher, would I be offered more?"

Her head popped up when her lawyer shifted in his seat. He nodded, although she knew he was uncomfortable answering her barrage of questions about the opposite sex.

Mr. Smith was her father's attorney, then hers when her parents passed away earlier in the year. Robert Smith gave her a smile, even if it didn't reach his eyes. Which were heavy lidded and glazed as if he never slept. Which he probably didn't. He had been good to her family, even though the majority of Williams were all gone now. Jennie and her brother were all that was left.

It wouldn't be long before John's name would come up with the lawyer. It always did. Her brother was a snake in the grass. He wanted it all. She wasn't about to relinquish her stake in her parent's company. Not yet. Not until she found what she was looking for. If it were up to John, he would wipe out the name of their ancestors as if they never existed. She wasn't about to let this happen.

"Miss Williams, you are accepting their terms?"

Jennie sighed. She was going to have to if she wanted to accomplish her next task. "I suppose so. Although, I didn't see in the letter where I would be compensated for living arrangements."

He nodded, scanning the letter briefly. "It doesn't say precisely that you will have a place to live. I do see they have made all the arrangements to supply you with what you need and your comfort. I am assuming that will include boarding as well. If you are compliant with this arrangement, please sign here and we will have this agreement sent to Mill Ridge immediately."

Jennie picked up a pen to sign the document. "When do I leave?" She was anxious to be on her way. The sooner the better since she didn't know how long it would take to find what she was looking for. He handed her a train ticket with the date and time stamped on, paid for by the folks of Mill Ridge, which she tucked away in the pocket of her dress.

Mr. Smith waited until she signed the agreement before speaking

again. With a curt smile, she stood.

"If you will be seated, we have one other item to discuss."

Here it comes! Jennie sat back down, propping her elbows on the edge of the desk and leaning forward, so unladylike even Mr. Smith stared at her in surprise. After his scrutiny, she placed her hands in her lap, realizing the man was very prim and proper and she was acting like a schoolgirl instead of someone who teaches school.

She stared, livid blue eyes watching the older man. Pushing a strand of blonde hair that fell from its pin, she waited. Her brother was forever trying to get her to sign over her share of the company to him.

Mr. Smith cleared his throat. "Now, I know you have been my client since your parents passed away. Their Last Will and Testament explicitly divides the company and all assets between the two of you."

She interrupted. "What does John want now?"

Mr. Smith shuffled some paperwork. He seemed nervous. "This is difficult to say since I work for the both of you. However, there is a clause in the legal paperwork that states if either one of you are not present for the day to day business, the other party may buy you out. It's all here. Legal." He thrust a page from the original will across the desk.

"I don't need to see it. I read their will, I am aware it is there. My brother is rotten to the core! How did he even know I accepted a teaching position in Texas?"

When she saw the attorney's pale face, Jennie tapped her slim fingers on the desk, knowing he was the one to tell John of her intentions. Mr. Smith always had the interests of the company in mind so it didn't surprise, only disappointed Jennie. She had thought he was aware of each of their positions. He knew she didn't want to give up her share of the business even though she didn't know one thing about industrial commerce. It had been the one thing she was able to cling on to that belonged to her parents.

"It was my duty to inform him, just as it is my duty to inform you if there was anything from his side. I have been the mediator from day one, Miss Williams. I know this is a hard pill for you to swallow but

perhaps it is time to relinquish your assets. You will be paid handsomely at market value. Your parents wanted it done this way. It is stipulated in your parents will so it is fair to the both of you."

At first she was affronted that he wanted her to hand over her share so quickly. Then again, maybe he was right. What good did a business do her that she knew nothing about? Besides, if she finds the treasure, there were no plans to return to her brother's side. Her interests were in something altogether different. Had she been doing her family an injustice by clinging onto a piece of the company? To be honest with herself, it wasn't the company she worried about, but the William's legacy.

After careful thought, Jennie stood. She made her way around the big desk and gave Mr. Smith a hug, which quite surprised him. "Where do I sign?"

Mr. Smith's hands shook as he shuffled papers around, pulling out several for her signature. She scanned the legal document, noting the amount her brother offered for her share of the company. With a quick twist, she crossed out the amount and doubled it, knowing it was now a fair market price.

Jennie handed the papers to Mr. Smith. "You tell my brother I may not have been involved much but I do know the value of this company. I won't take any less. Mr. Smith you may forward the amount to my banker. Good day and have a wonderful life."

Jennie ran down the steps, making her way to the busy side walk outside. Pittsburgh was a busy town, there were people everywhere. She loved it and yet something deep down yearned for a whole different life.

Walking towards the place she called home, Jennie paused to look around. A light smog filled the air while people hurried down the street. She passed so many others who nodded or brushed right past her as she made her way home to one of the more prominent parts of town. Striding past Sarah Negley's farmhouse mansion, she turned towards the family's Highland Park residence. They had a modest Victorian home there if one compared it to Pittsburgh finest families.

Jennie didn't always feel welcome now that her parents were gone.

She lived in the three-story home with a brother she never got along with and his wife who didn't want children. She was all but ignored except for polite conversation.

When John found out she had an interest in becoming a teacher, he had scoffed at the idea, instead wanting her to take an interest in their company. Instead, she had gone to a Normal School, an establishment that provided teacher training. She had immediately gotten a teaching job close by and hadn't looked back.

Ever since she had decided to become a teacher, her brother had insisted she give up her share of the company. She had refused for so long because it was easier to keep an eye on things this way. Now, she stood in front of the enormous house, knowing when she got on the train to Mill Ridge, it would be the last time she stepped foot inside her family home. Her brother would never allow her back. He was going to be so glad to be rid of her.

A sigh escaped Jennie. Her hearts desire to help children learn how to read and write and use simple arithmetic had interfered with her idling away as a rich débutante. No one understood her desire to better the world. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the train ticket. One week from today she'd be on her way to a new life, far away from here.

If it was the only way to keep the Williams legacy from dissipating into thin air then her decision had been the right one. Her brother always argued that their family before their parents had been tainted and they'd best be forgotten.

She had remembered the many arguments with him. He had sworn to make sure any family before their parents would be buried away. He had even gone as far as removing photos of generations of Williams from the foyer.

All because of one relative. John's plans were to grow the company so large even the Vanderbilts would recognize the Williams name. He didn't want anyone to ever find out their great-grandmother had been captured by the Indians and was shunned by the family. Now, because of an act she wasn't able to prevent, John wanted to erase their past, the history on her mother's side.

Jennie was not about to allow this to happen. If her parents were alive today, they'd be shocked that John was being so heartless and cruel. The only reason great-grandmother's portrait had hung on the family wall for so long was because of Jennie's own mother making sure it did. Now, with Jennie's mother gone, it was up to Jennie to make sure their legacy stayed alive.

Her brother wanted any memory of great-grandmother dead and buried, never to surface again.

Jennie was not about to let this happen. She knew just how to bring it all back.

She had to find the treasure.

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Mack studied the photo. "A teacher? You've got to be kidding me?"

"She's the only one that can lead us to the treasure. Word has it her mother left her a map of the whereabouts. The teacher hid the information from her brother but he always knew about the supposed treasure and map. She doesn't think he knows."

"Why do we call it a treasure, it's a -"

"Mack! I've been hired by one of the most influential men in Pittsburgh to find this. Either you want this case or I'll give it to someone else."

Mack laughed. "You don't have anyone else right now and you know it."

Pinkerton grunted. "Perhaps you are right, not unless I want to go there myself, which I do not."

Mack leaned back in his chair, crossing a boot over an ankle. He scrutinized Mr. Pinkerton. They had been friends for a few years but Mack's purpose here today was to quit. He was tired of pursuing outlaws and petty thieves. After what happened to Marlene, he wasn't sure he had it in him to fight the bad guy any longer.

Mack was a man of few words. The truth was his only way. "I came here to offer my resignation."

Mr. Pinkerton chewed on the end of a cigar. He stared at Mack with

sharp eyes. “I figured so. You’ve changed this past year.”

Mack shrugged. Pinkerton knew what had happened to his sister five years earlier. He also knew Mack had been on the trail of three outlaws on the border of Mexico the night the tragedy occurred. If Mack had been aware of what John Abbott was doing, he may have saved Marlene. Mack looked up at his boss. “I can’t help blaming this company for keeping me away. I know it isn’t right but it’s eating at me. You knew about Abbott and yet no one went after him. I can’t go a day without feeling angry about the whole situation.”

Pinkerton sighed. He set the unlit cigar down on the metal desk. “I’m saddened to know you want out. As a friend, I ask you one favor. Hear me out before you go.”

Mack nodded. “Fair enough, what do you want to say?”

“Abbott had a history of finding women who were in bad situations and making a profit off them. He even had lured women of substance away from their homes and families pretending to be an honorable man. His mail order fiasco was his last crime. Just like your sister, he lured these women away, promising a good life. Instead, he tried to sell them for a profit to unsavory men of ill repute. The good folks of Mill Ridge had enough and put a stop to his evil ways. The man is dead.”

“It’s a lucky thing he is, but it’s five years too late. I know all of this, why are you telling me?”

Pinkerton raised a brow. “I understand how you feel. I’m sorry your sister is unable to care for herself. I am not trying to rehash the past. This case may help with your sister’s care.”

“It’s not only her care, but the childs as well.”

“From what I understand, she is being taken care of by a family near Dallas. Is this correct?”

Mack flexed his fingers. “That’s right. I tried to bring her to Chicago but the noises on the train had her screaming at the top of her lungs. She scared the child and upset the passengers so bad, so we had to get off the train in Dallas. I pay good money for her to be taken care of, although the family has mentioned it isn’t a permanent situation. I’m not placing her in that institute for insane people. She’s not insane.”

Pinkerton grimaced. “I’m sorry she is a burden through no account of your own, Mack. Look, you are one of the best Pinkerton agents I’ve ever worked with. I don’t want to lose you but I know you can’t do your job like this. There may be a way for you to put your mind at ease.”

“How so?” Mack doubted there was anything the agency could do to make him feel better after he had let his own sister be brutalized by a madman. If he hadn’t been on that long jaunt along the borders of Mexico, he may have prevented her from leaving as a mail order bride. He may have been able to save her from John Abbott! It was his fault she wound up the way she did. The agency was aware of Abbott’s crimes but no one got to him in time.

“There are two folds to this job. The man who hired us from Pittsburgh, John Williams, wants a certain treasure that Abbott buried before his demise. It is a book. Inside the book it is alleged there are some valuable certificates worth a small fortune that were stolen from the railroad by Abbott and his cronies.

John Williams does not know about the certificates, it came to our attention when he mentioned the name of the book. The Pinkerton Agency has been looking for this same book for the last year and a half since Abbott was killed.”

“What’s so valuable about a book?”

“I don’t think anything. When you retrieve the book, you take the certificates out. They belong to the railroad. The book, well, it can go back to Mr. William’s family. It’s why he paid me a small fortune to find it, but that’s not my number one priority. The railroad wants their certificates back.”

Mack knew Pinkerton had been paid for the job a long time ago. With his honor on the line, nothing would stop the man from finding the certificates and returning them to their rightful owner. For the William’s man to contact Pinkerton about the book had been sheer luck.

Mack shrugged. “I don’t know why I need to be the one to do the job. I told you I came here to quit.”

Pinkerton leaned forward. “This is the chance of a lifetime, Mack.

With the money I plan to pay you from the reward of recovering these lost certificates, you won't have to worry about your sister's care ever again. You can retire and there will be plenty of money at your disposal. Tell me you will take this one last job?"

Mack clenched his hands tight. He wanted to walk away.

Pinkerton scribbled on a strip of paper. He pushed it across the desk with the purpose to entice.

Mack didn't want to look. He avoided the paper for as long as he could, staring into Pinkerton's face. The man was ruthless. He knew exactly how to get his own way. With a quick shift, he gazed at the figures written there. It forced him to suck in a large breath of air.

When he looked back at Pinkerton, the man had the nerve to smile. He nodded. "What do you say?"

"Somethings been nagging at me since you gave me all this information."

Pinkerton sat back, a satisfied look on his face. "Ask away."

"None of this makes any sense. The brother hired the Pinkerton Agency to find a book. The teacher, his sister, is following a map that will lead her to the treasure. Why did Williams hire us if his sister is already searching for the book and most likely will find it if the map holds true?"

"The sister is looking for the book for her own personal reasons. Mr. Williams wants the book destroyed. Under no circumstances does he want the sister to keep the book, which is her intention. Williams hired us to make certain the book will be destroyed when found. Is that clear?"

"Understood." Although, after he brought back the certificates and claimed his percent of the money, Mack didn't much care what happened to the book. All he wanted was enough money to care for Marlene and little Charlotte.

Chapter 2

*J*ennie stood in front of the small school house and stared. After the driver deposited her on an empty lot beside the tall church in Mill Ridge, she was left standing there beside the two carpetbags she brought along.

The town was so quaint and quiet it was disturbing. Where are the children? Where are the folks of Mill Ridge and why wasn't she greeted when she arrived?

She heard music coming from the church beside the empty lot. Perhaps everyone was inside, after all, it was late Wednesday afternoon. Instead of entering the church to greet her new neighbors, a small school house setting at the far end of the empty lot caught her eye. She let the two carpetbags sit on the ground and made her way towards the school.

The rectangular building with clap-board siding was painted white, it's simple gabled roof made of shake shingles and a belfry placed above the entrance.

She wanted to see inside.

Jennie made her way up the few steps, placing her hand on the door, excited and yet nervous to go in. She looked around, hoping someone would appear so she didn't feel as if she were intruding without permission.

She waited a few more seconds. Just to be certain.

When no one showed up to escort her, she took a deep breath and pushed open the door. There was no better time than the present to see where she'd be working. The floor was made of plank wood, its finish shiny from raw-linseed oil. She noticed the pail of oil and brush setting on a shelf in the cloakroom to the right of the entrance. It would get used quite a bit in her new schoolroom, she loved to keep

things clean and tidy. This was where the children would hang their coats on the simple nails below the wooden shelving that lined the wall.

Jennie took a walk around the room, noting four small paned windows down each side of the building. The sun sent plenty of light inside, flowing throughout the room. She also noticed kerosene lamps hanging on hooks for another source of light for early morning and on gloomy, rainy days.

Blackboards ran along the front and part way down the side of each wall. Someone had installed the slate boards, attaching chalk trays that ran the length of the blackboards. She was pleased, it gave plenty of space for the students to work as well as her. Jennie had been prepared for a primitive school house but this was pleasantly new and had all the modern conveniences.

Along with a pot-bellied stove towards the front of the room to stamp off damp and cool mornings, a stack of wood was neatly lined against one wall. Wooden desks sat in rows of two on each side of the stove. The school room was spacious, another thing she hadn't expected.

Running a hand along the teacher's own large wooden desk in the front of the room, Jennie sighed. She was elated this was going to be hers. At least for now. The book had been her number one priority.

Today, this seemed more important somehow.

She shook herself. Jennie had work to do. She needed to find the book, yes, and keep the legacy alive but this, it was, a dream come true!

Her own classroom!

In Pittsburgh, she had shared a classroom with another teacher, who had been there for a long time. Even though Mrs. Diemler gave her a chance to teach the children, she always corrected Jennie in front of others.

Now, there was no one to tell her she was wrong about anything! She twirled around in a circle, lifting her arms out.

"I'm sure the townsfolk of Mill Ridge will be glad to see you are so happy!"

Jennie almost tripped over her skirts at the sound of a male voice. She swung around to see a tall, older man in a dark suit standing inside the front door. His eyes sparkled in merriment as he made his way to the front of the room. Holding out a long, slim hand, he gave her a reassuring smile. “No need to feel embarrassed. You must be our new teacher, Miss Williams?”

She nodded, unable to speak at first. What a first impression, caught dancing around like a, um, a trollop! Jennie touched her cheek, hoping her face wasn’t too red with embarrassment.

“I’m sorry, sir. Oh, it’s just this is so much more than I expected!”

“Indeed! I’m happy you are pleased. My name is Reverend Goodson.”

She nodded, desperate to pull herself together. “Reverend Goodson, a pleasure to meet you. I am Jennie Williams.”

“Welcome to Mill Ridge. As you can see, this is your new school. There is a wooden plaque on the wall by the back door, dedicated to Mister and Misses J.T. Pope. Their monetary donation was what built this school.”

She walked along with him to read the sign, curious to know the folks who were kind enough to hand over money for such a privilege. Most towns in the west used a church or saloon if they didn’t have a school. Mill Ridge was one of the luckier towns. “How nice of them. I hope I may thank them for giving the town a means to build such a fine building.”

The reverend shook his head. “I’m afraid they left awhile back to their family ranch. We all hope they will be back again soon but the parents are not well, so who knows. You’ll like them if you ever get to meet them.”

“I’m sure. In the meantime, Reverend Goodson, is there a place for me to stay?”

“The Mill Ridge Boarding House is right down the street. I’ll escort you there myself. But first, let’s take a tour of the rest of the school.”

Most schoolrooms had one door in and out but someone had been thinking ahead. There was a door behind the teacher’s desk, along side the blackboard that led outside to the privy a short distance

away.It kept students from having to go the whole way around the building, getting lost or distracted too easily. After the tour, Jennie walked with the reverend to the empty lot where her belongings still stood.

Even though he was an older gentleman, he had the strength of a younger man. He picked up the two heavy carpetbags without a complaint and began walking towards the boarding house.

Jennie entered inside, where a younger woman introduced herself as Sadie. She ordered the carpetbags to be placed at the top of the stairs and sent the reverend on his way. Reverend Goodson seemed happy to oblige, hurrying out the front door.

Miss Sadie seemed too young to run a well-established rental house but yet there she was, introducing Jennie to some of the renters seated in the parlor. “Now, Miss Jennie, if I may call you by your given name, let me show you the room I hand-picked for you. It is the first room at the top of the stairs, which gives you better access to a view of the main street. Also, and it isn’t clear to me why, most people love the fact they don’t have to walk by other doors to get downstairs. So, in light of all that, I thought the room closest to the stairs was perfect for you.”

Jennie followed up the stairs, trying to pay attention to her words but the woman went on and on. Sadie was a lovely young lady who loved to talk. Jennie was certain they would get along great but between the train ride, then the buggy ride and a tour of the school, she was exhausted. The woman’s words were beginning to run together. Jennie stifled a yawn so she would not insult the proprietor.

Miss Sadie turned around to find her in that position with her hand over her mouth. “Oh, dear, here I am babbling on and you must be tired. Let me get your carpetbags inside and give you time to rest. I’m so sorry, dear.” She pushed open the door, allowing Jennie to enter.

A lovely quilt covered the bed, which looked so enticing right about now. The room wasn’t too big, with only room for a bed and five drawer dresser. A mirror hung from the wall, along with a few hooks to hang belongings.

Muffled voices in the hallway had Jennie turning her head towards

the doorway. She had been peeking out the window at the view of Main Street. Miss Sadie had been right, the view was wonderful. She could see up and down the street, as far as the livery on one end and the empty lot where she was let off earlier.

A large shadow hovered over Miss Sadie as she stepped inside. Then a gentleman appeared behind her, holding a carpetbag in each hand. He was tall and dark with almost black hair, neatly trimmed and wearing an impeccable three piece suit. He gazed at Jennie with dark, intriguing eyes. It almost took her breath away.

Who was this man?

"Thank you, Mr. Everett. Miss Jennie, this is one of our renters. Mr. Everett is from Chicago, Illinois."

Jennie was unable to speak. She never had a problem forming a word but with the intensity of the man's gaze she was speechless. She nodded and tried to smile, swallowing the lump in her throat.

"Ma'am," he said, giving her a nod then setting the two bags inside the door. He disappeared as quickly as he appeared.

Jennie found her voice. "That was kind of him."

Miss Sadie gave Jennie a big smile. She leaned in and whispered as if the two were in a conspiracy together. "I love this job. I give the men a smile and they do whatever I ask."

Jennie laughed. She was going to enjoy staying here. Sadie seemed so friendly and honest. It was refreshing to speak with someone who seemed to enjoy life instead of always worrying about the business end of things. Like her brother and his wife. It was all they ever spoke about during supper or during any other conversation.

"Thank you, Sadie. I'll turn in for now. It's been a long day."

"Let me know if you need anything. Supper is over but I can whip you up a light meal if you'd like."

Jennie raised her hand and shook her head. "I'm fine, but thank you."

"If you need anything at all, feel free to help yourself. I always leave some sweets on the table if anyone gets hungry later in the evening. You are welcome to have some at your leisure. Oh, and tomorrow night, there is a social at the church. I'm sure you will want

to come and meet everyone in town. When you aren't so tired, we'll go over the rules for living here. Oh, and also, the front porch is a lovely place to sit and relax. If you can't ever sleep, I recommend a cup of tea and some time on the front porch."

Jennie tried to take it all in. All she wanted to do was fall into bed. The moment Sadie left the room, she undressed and washed up, then slid under the covers.

The day had gone well. She was here, in Mill Ridge, where she would start a new life as a teacher and have access to the area where the treasure was supposed to be buried. Jennie felt the pocket in her nightdress, reassuring herself the folded map was there. It never left her side, not even when she went to bed.

The map was the most important piece of paper in the world to her. It held the answer to her long awaited prayers. When her mother had given it to her, Jennie made a promise she intended to keep.

She would find the book and bring it to life. The William's legacy would not be forgotten.

Ten days after she was given the map, her parents had both been the victims of a horrible flat-boat accident along the Allegheny River. They had been warned not to take it downriver but didn't listen and drowned when the boat capsized. There had been an important shipment they needed but it hadn't mattered after that.

Soon after, her brother John had taken over the company, marrying one of the more prominent débutantes in the area and then began to wipe out ancestors on her mother's side, claiming they were no longer fit to be in the company of Williams.

It was almost as if her mother knew the intentions of her own son, that he was trying to erase the family he was born into. Perhaps it was why she handed the map to Jennie without explanation, only hope.

"You'll want to know someday, I promise. Don't ever let anyone, including and especially family, forget your great grandmother's name, Mabel Winthrop *Wachiwi* Williams."

Unable to sleep, Jennie stood by the door, listening for sounds of other patrons. When she didn't hear any noise, she placed her long lightweight coat around her shoulders and slipped on a pair of

moccasins her mother had given her, then crept downstairs to find a plate of cookies on the table.

Two oil lamps, one in the parlor and one on the table burned, throwing shadows along the far wall. It was dark outside the windows, as night had fallen several hours ago. Jennie wanted to sit on the porch, take in some fresh air and prepare herself mentally for tomorrow, when she'd meet the children that she'd be teaching.

Hopefully, the town would approve of her teaching skills. After all, they were the ones paying her salary. She had to keep the treasure map safe and work on that end of things after school.

A deep sigh escaped Jennie. She picked up a cookie, noticing the front door was slightly ajar. She stepped outside, hoping not to disturb anyone else.

"Come on out, it's a beautiful night."

It was the stranger who brought her bags in earlier. His deep voice sounded soft, not gruff like earlier. She stepped outside, careful not to close the door completely. She was right in doing so.

"Keep the door ajar, it's lock won't allow us back in if you pull it shut."

Jennie wondered about that. "Does the boarding house close down at a certain hour?"

"Nine sharp. If you are not here, you're left to fend for yourself. Haven't you heard the rules yet?"

Jennie smiled. She found her way across the porch and sat down on what looked like a glider. Mr. Everett was on a rocker alongside. "Sadie determined I was too tired to listen to them this evening, but then once I went to bed, it turns out I'm wide awake."

Jennie broke the cookie in half, offering Mr. Everett a piece.

He obliged, brushing the tips of her fingers. She pulled back when his warm skin grazed her own, worried it was inappropriate to be sitting here with a man. It was rather dark, but this was her first day in Mill Ridge. If anyone took offence to her sitting on the porch with a man, alone, would it cause havoc amongst her peers? It was a boarding house, so it must be okay to sit on the porch no matter who was there.

Jennie didn't have the will to retreat back to her small room anyway. The sky was filled with tiny stars, a million at least. She didn't want to go inside and toss and turn all night long. No, she concluded, this town will have to accept her as she is, no matter what. If they didn't, then she would find the treasure and move on.

They finished their snack in silence with only the soft sounds of a cricket chirping in timely increments. She gazed up at part of the sky she was able to see under the porch roof. "There is the Big Dipper," she mentioned, pointing.

He chuckled. "Tell me, Teacher, how do you know? I look up and see a cluster of stars blanketing the sky."

"Its relatively easy." Jennie stood. She loved to teach, to show others what she learned. Walking to the edge of the porch, she leaned her hands on the porch rail and looked up.

Mr. Everett stood beside her, his large presence making her feel shy. Then her teaching mode took over. She raised an arm, pointing to the north. "There is the north star, Polaris. Every day certain stars go around it and they remind you of a dipper. You know, the ladle that you would use in a kitchen?"

"I see." She didn't think he did. She picked up his arm, guiding his hand to the first star in the big dipper.

"See the bright star, now look down and follow the rest, they stand out and form the ladle."

Mr. Everett sucked in his breath. Their cheeks were almost touching as she took his arm, making his own hand trace the big dipper. She was fully aware of his warm presence. Was she being too bold? A new teacher never missed an opportunity to teach and yet at the same time anyone walking by may think ill of her if she was cheek to cheek with such a handsome man. Who was, by the way, staying in the same facility as her.

Jennie took a step back, dropping her arm. She didn't want to appear brazen. "I'm sorry. That was too forward of me. I get carried away."

She was almost nose to nose with him and able to see into those dark, intruding eyes. Even though it was wrong, she wasn't able to

look away. What did this man do to her senses?

It occurred to her he was holding her hand in his. Between them. When she licked her lips his eyes went right to her mouth. Oh, dear! This was rather scrupulous of her. She wasn't even here but a few hours and already stirring up trouble.

Jennie took another step back. Mr. Everett took a huge step forward, still clinging onto her hand. "I, uh, should be getting back," she whispered.

He was still hanging onto every word she said. Those dark eyes of his stared at her lips, so she licked them again without thinking. He groaned and lowered his head, pulling her against him, still clinging onto her hand.

Jennie wasn't able to do anything but hang on tight. When he kissed her all her senses were lost. Against her will, she shuddered in his arms, while tiny breaths of air barely escaped her lungs.

Oh, dear Lord in heaven above, what am I doing? If this is wrong, send a lightening bolt to strike in front of me because I'm afraid that is the only thing that will prevent me from continuing to kiss this handsome man!

There was no lightening to strike her. No sudden sharp noises to break her free from his kisses. There was only the two of them on the front porch, the stars brilliantly shining down, wreaking havoc in her mind. How was she ever going to keep a clear head if this man had the notion to kiss her like this every single day!

This stranger she met two hours ago?

What was wrong with her?

She wasn't even ashamed when he broke away, his chest heaving, those dark eyes filled with something she wasn't able to name. There wasn't a word she knew in her teaching career to describe the way he stared into her very soul.

Dear Lord above, I don't even feel ashamed!

He didn't say a word, not one word. His hands went to her cheeks, squeezing them in a loving, caressing way and he placed a soft kiss upon her mouth before slipping back inside.

Jennie stood on the front porch, alone, the stars the only thing shining in the night. The rest of the town was fast asleep except for

the crickets who never seemed to quiet.

Stunned, and slightly surprised, Jennie wavered in the dark until she felt capable to go inside and up the stairs.

She knew the taste of his lips on her own would keep her awake for hours.

Chapter 3

*M*ack stumbled up the stairs, digging in his pocket for the key to his room. He needed to lock himself inside. He hadn't meant to kiss her like that. When she licked her lips he was done for. He didn't think, only reacted.

What will she think of him now? Mack had a job to do here! He pulled off his boots, stripped himself of his clothing and laid on the bed with his arms behind his head.

Mack stared at the ceiling, the darkness making things worse. All he saw when he stared at the ceiling was her face between his hands, her soft lips kissing him back, her head thrown back waiting for his kisses!

Dang it, this wouldn't work!

He needed the certificates in the book. She was the ways and means and had the map he needed. And, when she stared at him with those baby blue eyes he wasn't able to resist! Any thoughts of the book or his job or the treasure was forgotten! Pinkertons didn't act like this!

He honestly figured a teacher would be easy to friend. He had it all mapped out in his head. He'd follow her around, watch her every move and when she began the search for the book, he'd be right there two steps behind her. But she wasn't what he had expected. She didn't sport dark hair plastered to her head in a tight bun or thick glasses propped on her nose like he thought all teachers looked like. She wasn't prim and proper with her nose stuck in the air.

Instead, she had full, thick blonde hair that was tucked away in a soft bun, tied with loose ribbons. Her blue eyes scorched him with every look. He wasn't able to resist the depth of those blue eyes. No, she wasn't at all what he had expected.

Mack closed his eyes, trying to keep the images from his mind. It

was going to be a long, long night.

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By the time he finally got a few hours of sleep, dawn was gifting the world with daylight. He slept through the rising of the sun and the first meal of the day. When Mack made his way downstairs to the breakfast table, all he found were a few slices of fresh bread left out on a plate.

Mack picked one up, grabbing his hat as he strolled down the steps and then down the street. Mill Ridge was alive with activity, with many townsfolk out and about this morning. Mack tipped his hat, aware of the stares he received.

A man in a stylish black suit and bow tie looked out of place in a small town like this and everyone knew so. He'd have to set everyone straight so they didn't become suspicious of his actions. Out of courtesy, Mack went straight to the sheriff's office.

When he opened the door, the sheriff was standing in the middle of the office, his arms wrapped around a woman, kissing her. Not even his entrance broke them apart.

He cleared his throat.

The woman jumped back. "Now, Salem, that was not necessary. Why, I'm flabbergasted!"

Salem laughed out loud. He grinned when she blew him a kiss as she ran out the door. "Howdy, sir. Welcome to Mill Ridge," she called out to Mack, not looking him in the eye.

Mack grinned at the dark haired sheriff. He was younger than Mack and a few inches taller.

Sheriff Nightingale offered him a chair. He sat at his desk, looking out the window when she waved from across the street. "She's my wife," he told Mack, lifting a hand to wave back.

"Not my business," Mack said, and meant those words. What happens in Mill Ridge, well, as long as it wasn't against him or what he was doing, was purely their business.

"In case anyone wanted to know, Sophie's my wife."

The sheriff was still looking out the window, not really paying attention to Mack.

Mack waited, patient until he was able to draw the sheriff's full attention. Exactly three minutes later, the sheriff tore his eyes from the window. Mack snapped his pocket watch shut and placed it back inside his vest pocket, checking the time.

Sheriff Nightingale didn't apologize. "You married?" he asked, apparently fascinated with his wife.

Mack shook his head. "Nope, don't plan on it any time soon."

"State your business, then."

"I'm here under cover." He flipped open a small square leather case which held a badge on one side, a black and white head shot, along with Mack's information. Mack tossed it onto the sheriff's desk.

The sheriff stared at his credentials. He didn't seem surprised. "Pinkerton? What are you doing in my town?"

The Sheriff didn't seem happy Mack was here. Well, he could hardly blame the man, even though a Pinkerton worked with the law whenever they were able to. He had heard some of these small town sheriff's didn't like anyone interfering without their permission. It was one of the reasons he came here first.

Mack rubbed his clean-shaven face. "I'm here on official Pinkerton business. I'll get right to the point. John Abbott, a man who was much despised here left a trail of money that he stole from the railroad. Even though he is dead, they want it back."

Mack left out the part about the book. No sense involving the new teacher in town until he assessed her situation. If he was able to retrieve the certificates without much ado, all was well in the world.

If he was able to stay away from the teacher, that'd be even better. A man wasn't able to get any work done with a woman like her constantly on his mind.

"You smitten with someone?" the sheriff asked, a quirky grin on his face.

Dang it, man! He hadn't wanted to lolly-gag about Miss Williams like this! Not when he was doing official business! "Nope, was thinking about something else."

Sheriff Nightingale smirked. “That’s what we all said at first. Give it time, you won’t be yourself until you give in and tell her how you feel.”

Mack rubbed his chin. “I’m here on business, that’s all.”

The sheriff grinned. “I’m sure you are. Well, then, let’s get down to business. Where in the world do you think Abbott has these certificates? He roomed at the saloon on the second floor. That was my domain before I became sheriff and I didn’t see any certificates from the railroad anywhere in those premises. I’d have known if they were there.”

“He buried them.”

“What’s that you say?”

Mack nodded. “It’s true. The Pinkertons have an idea of where, it will take some time to figure it all out but I wanted to come to you first out of respect for you and the townsfolk and ask permission to do my job.”

Sheriff Nightingale nodded. “Certainly. It would help calm some folks down if there was a share of the reward given to the townsfolk. I know the railroad will offer a hefty reward. After what Abbott and those outlaws did to this town, I believe they are all entitled to some compensation.”

Mack frowned. He tipped his hat in acknowledgement when he placed it back on his head. “I’ll see what I can do. Thanks for your time.” With those words, he stood and reached out to shake the sheriff’s hand, then picked up his credentials, stuffing them back in his vest pocket.

Mack groaned once he got back outside. Giving up some of the reward meant less money for his sister’s care. He hadn’t planned on this turn of events.

“Hey there, mister. You’re new to town!”

Mack turned to find a man in a gray faded two piece suit trailing behind him. His look was all seriousness with black hair pasted to his skull and a pair of oval shaped glasses perched on his nose.

He stopped to shake hands.

“Mister, I noticed you came in yesterday. You sticking around here

long?"

Mack shrugged. "Not sure. Right now I'm passing through." It was all he needed to know.

"It's always a pleasure to see new faces. We're growing Mill Ridge mighty fast. I'm Nester Cravell, owner of the Cravell Land & Title Company across the street and up the block twice over. Now listen, I know you are passing through but do I have some deals here you won't want to miss! Why, you stop by my office next week and I'll have a nice, three bedroom right on main street available to purchase. The folks who owned it are heading back to the big city. They had enough of small town living."

Before Mack was able to speak one word he kept right on talking. Mack's eyes bulged as the man wouldn't shut up.

"I know you were thinking of moving on after your business here is done but let me tell you, this town has probably every thing you need. Where you from, mister?"

Mack tried to mumble Chicago but before he was able to get the word out, Mr. Cravell waved to someone across the street. "There she is, the new teacher. I'm sorry, our conversation will have to wait." He pulled out a card from his vest pocket, shoving it at Mack. "Here, stop by any time but if you want the house the Sills are vacating, stop by next Wednesday. I promise you won't be disappointed!"

Mack watched as he crossed the street, practically running after Miss Williams. She spotted him standing there like an idiot staring at her and lifted a hand to wave. When the title agent came towards her, Miss Williams seemed startled at first when Mr. Cravell placed a hand on her arm.

Mack took a step forward. Cravell seemed like a friendly enough person but way too friendly. Mack went ahead and crossed the street, turning back when he felt eyes on him.

The sheriff leaned against the door, a thumb in his gun belt, a knowing grin on his face.

Mack turned away. He hadn't wanted the sheriff to know he had an interest in the teacher. Guess it was too late now. Usually he was good at covering up his feelings. How in the world did Nightingale know he

had an interest in her? The man was too observant for his own good. Or, were his emotions written all over his face?

If that were the case, it was not good! He always did an excellent job at hiding them. At least he always thought so. Evidently, so did Pinkerton or he wouldn't be one of the company's best agents. The problem was he never took an interest in anyone quite like he had the school teacher. She got under his skin something fierce.

The closer he got, he realized Cravell was offering her the same house he just offered Mack. What the world? Even though he wasn't in the market to buy property, the title agent was causing a buyer's war. "Hey, you scoundrel! You asked me first. What are you doing?"

Cravell turned to find Mack right behind him. He didn't realize Mack was onto him until the very moment Mack spoke up. The man's eyes about popped from his head. Fear emanated from every crevice on his skin. "It's yours," he quipped and took off down the street so fast it made Mack smile.

A confused Miss Williams stood there, grasping the handle of a basket that looked rather heavy.

"Sorry about this, Miss Williams. I didn't mean to intrude on your conversation."

"It was hardly a conversation as he did all the talking. I heard bits and pieces about a house on the market and buying it before another interested party snatches it up. I assume you are the interested party?"

No wonder the little swindler ran off so quickly! "I guess I am, although it wasn't because I had any interest in the house on the market. I'm passing through."

She nodded. "Well, then, this is quite strange. Good day." As Miss Williams turned to leave, he wanted to reach out and stop her from doing so. Instead, he nodded towards the basket.

"May I escort you to the school?" Assuming that was where she was going. "I can carry that heavy basket for you."

She hesitated then agreed. "It is rather heavy. I didn't realize how much." Before Mack had a chance to take it, she shoved the basket in his hands and began to walk towards the white-clapboard building.

Mack never thought he'd be strolling down the street with a lady,

holding a basket in one hand while she hung onto his sleeve. It was pretty darn nice.

“School doesn’t start until the day after tomorrow but I wanted to bring my supplies ahead of time to make sure I have everything I need.”

Mack nodded as she talked.

“I wonder if you know how to operate the wood stove as I’ve never done so before?”

“I can show you how it works. You’ll want to have the older kids in your class bring in more firewood every day, that’s if you need it.”

“It can be chilly early morning. I want a nice, warm environment to teach in.”

“I agree.” They were walking across the empty lot.

“I am sorry about last night.”

He didn’t miss a step. “I’m not.”

She hesitated. “You’re not?”

“Not one bit. I enjoyed sitting on the porch with you, star gazing.”

He didn’t mention the kiss, even though that was what she had brought up.

“Yes, and I enjoy teaching about the stars. It is one of my favorite subjects besides history.”

Mack grinned. “You can teach me about the stars any night.” He meant if it included a kiss like the one they had shared but he didn’t say it. Still, she had to know what he meant.

A blush crept up her cheek. “Well, um, yes, then I guess we may want to look at the stars again this evening.”

He couldn’t believe his good luck. She wasn’t even slightly upset. Most women would be, even though she initiated the kiss. Well, kind of did. If anyone was to blame, it was her beautiful smile, those deep, blue eyes that he wasn’t able to look away from or those lips that called to him.

“Mr. Everett?”

He did it again! Lolly-gagging in bright daylight! About the lady he was standing next to!

Mack got a hold of himself before she realized what he was doing.

He helped her up the steps and opened the door. He strode to the front of the room, trying to keep some space between them. This was not a good thing. The woman drove him insane!

He needed to stay away.

Yet, all he had to do is look into her eyes and he was lost. He stood there like a helpless fool unable to even speak. Mack was never going to get the job done like this!

“Mr. Everett, can you show me how to use the stove before you go?”

The simple request shook him out of his thoughts. He began to gather some kindling, placing it in the belly of the stove, then showed her how to light it up. After stirring the ashes, bringing the sparks to life, he explained how it was done.

“I think I have the gist of it now,” she told him, bending down as he closed the door and turned the handle.

When he turned his head, hers was right there. Her blue eyes were looking into his own dark brown ones. She seemed confused as if she didn’t know what to say next.

He didn’t either.

Who wanted to talk at a time like this.

It was going to happen again and he had no control over himself. How can this be? *Think, Mack, think, for Pete’s sake!*

It was too late to think! He gathered her into his arms. Her hands wrapped around his neck, the soft touch causing his heart to race. Then she boldly and in broad daylight brought her mouth down on to his own. Mack crushed his lips to hers in a kiss he swore lasted for five minutes straight!

When she pushed away, he let her go, sorry that it had to end.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into me,” she complained, stepping back. “This is so wrong.”

Miss Williams turned her back to him, her hands holding her cheeks.

Mack wanted to reassure her, to take her back in his arms but he stood there, unmoving.

There was nothing to be said.

He was smitten by this woman he'd eventually have to hurt. In one day, yes, one day of knowing her, he had gone against every rule in the book.

He didn't remember now what those rules were, but he knew he had broken them all in the last twenty-four hours!

A sharp knock sounded on the entrance door. "Hello! Miss Williams?"

Miss Williams turned sharply to see who was there. "Come in," she called out, giving Mack a quick glance. He bent down at the stove, checking to make sure the fire was burning properly. It was really an excuse to get himself together. He heard the ladies talking.

"I'm Miss Addie, proprietor of Miss Addie's Boarding House in Wichita Falls. I thought I'd stop by and welcome you to the area. Oh," spilled out when she noticed Mack.

"Welcome, Miss Addie, I'm Jennie Williams." She hesitated a moment as if she were trying to catch her breath. "This is Mr. Everett, who was kind enough to carry my basket across the street and show me how to properly use the wood stove."

Miss Addie nodded to him as he stood to acknowledge the older woman. She had kind, all-knowing eyes. They glanced from Miss Williams and back to him.

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am," he said, tipping his hat. "I best be on my way."

Miss Addie nodded. "Good day to you. What is the nature of your business in Mill Ridge, sir?"

She was blunt and to the point. In his research of the area, Mack learned she owned many properties in Mill's Ridge as well as Wichita Falls. She was well known and honored throughout the area. He didn't want to get on any bad terms with the woman.

"I'll be honest, Miss Addie. It is private business and yet I checked in with the sheriff just a few minutes ago. He can fill you in. Good day."

Mack strode out the door trying hard not to take a look back at Miss Williams. It was one of the hardest things but he made it through the door and down the street without looking to see if her eyes were

on him.

Sweat poured from his brow. He needed a swim in the creek he noticed when he first came to town yesterday. Or a long ride. Mack headed straight to the livery to rent a horse. He had a lot of pent up energy he needed to release. A dip in the creek would shake this awful feeling that he was in way over his head.

Chapter 4

*M*iss Addie's sharp eyes watched as Mr. Everett closed the school house door. "Interesting fellow," she mentioned, one brow raised.

"He was kind enough to carry this heavy basket. Miss Addie, I don't mean to question things the moment I arrive, but I was wondering if you know who to speak to about buying supplies for the school? I've brought some of my own but they won't be nearly enough for all the students."

"The town council may help to answer your questions. I can give you a list of the members. I know the doctor and his wife are on the council as well as the sheriff's wife, Sophie." She turned to look at the school room, running her hand along the wooden desk in front of her. "You are fortunate to have such new things here."

"I'm very lucky, Miss Addie. I can't believe how wonderful this is. I was not expecting a brand new school."

"It was the idea of one of our townsfolk, who is no longer here. Rose was one of the girls who ran my boarding house. She fell in love with our minister, well, he wasn't really a minister, but someone who loved her dearly. It was quite the romance, some day you'll have to come for tea and I'll tell you all about it."

"That will be nice. I came in on the train at Wichita Falls but the buggy brought me here. I'm sorry I didn't have much time to see your town."

"You'll have plenty of time to come see us. I usually ride out here to check on my properties once a week or so. It's why I'm here today. I own the boarding house down the street and a few other places, but I don't want to bore you. Let's discuss your position. Have you found everything to your satisfaction?"

Jennie nodded. “Yes, very much.” Even a tall, dark handsome man who was in her thoughts since yesterday. And, her arms twice now. She had to stop thinking about him!

Miss Addie was giving her a strange look again. Almost as if she was able to read her mind. It couldn’t be, the woman didn’t know her at all. She was feeling guilty about kissing Mack in her schoolroom, was all.

About that!

It had to stop. No more offering her lips to an almost stranger. Who did things like this? Not a decent schoolmarm with a solid reputation! If she was going to make it here in this small town, she needed to stop kissing that man!

“Miss Williams?”

“I’m sorry, I was thinking about -”

“No need. I believe I understand.” A wide smile crept across the older woman’s face. “If you will come with me, I’ll introduce you to some of the town council. It will be much easier to ask for help if you know who to go to.”

Jennie wanted to stay hidden away in her classroom but followed Miss Addie around town. She had to admit the lady was well respected and introduced her to all the people that seemed to care about Mill Ridge. After several stops, their next visit led them to the local physician, Doctor Jackson Hart.

“Doc Hart, this is Miss Williams, our new school teacher. Is Caroline home?”

Doc Hart nodded. He was out on the porch, trying to convince an elderly woman to come inside to be checked. She was flat out refusing, clinging onto her son’s arm. “I’m not going in there, I’ll never leave!”

Miss Addie called out Caroline’s name several times until she found her out in the back yard, gathering eggs. A large dog followed right alongside, its ears alert when the two walked through the back door.

“Caroline!”

She turned to wave before plucking a few more eggs from their nests and placing them in a basket. “Hello, Miss Addie, would you

care for some eggs to take along home?"

"I'm afraid I have enough, Caroline. You may want to check with Sadie from the boarding house, has she been over today?"

"Yes, she bought some earlier. I'm afraid our chicken population is getting out of hand. If you know anyone who needs some chickens, please, send them to me."

Miss Addie addressed Jennie. "It's something you will have to get used to here. Some of the doctor's patients are too poor to pay him so they will bring chickens and other products to exchange for services. The good doc will never turn anyone away. But then he winds up with a slew of chickens it seems."

What an interesting concept. Jennie hadn't experienced anything like this in Pittsburgh. "I'll have to remember that if I need a doctor." Although she had plenty of money to pay for a doctor visit, she didn't want anyone to know this. It was better to be modest and humble.

The ladies spent the next hour discussing plans for the school. It seemed that Caroline took her involvement with the town council seriously. Miss Addie mentioned the fact Caroline was a block away if she needed anything at all. She also suggested Jennie seek help with the reverend if needed.

"Reverend Goodson, he keeps the morals in character when it comes to the town," Miss Addie told her. "It was why we wanted town council members who are able to relate to the people. You will find out there is no hanky panky here. Mill Ridge had a terrible reputation a few years back and the town got rid of all those awful hooligans. The townsfolk run everything. We want this to be an upstanding town with no one of ill repute. Ever."

Jennie almost blushed. Perhaps this was not the town meant for her. Because the last twenty four hours would render her a town floozy if they ever found about her antics with Mr. Everett!

"Now, Caroline will introduce you to Sophie, the sheriff's wife. She is madly in love and doesn't have a lot of time for the council but she understands the women who come here need to have a say in the town's decisions. So, we put her on the council to make sure everyone has a fair say. I'm sure she will tell you of her personal experiences so

I have no need to do so at the moment. Then, there is Sam Smith, the livery manager, who is an advocate for the working man. Unfortunately, our last member, Mr. Pope, was a town council member a few weeks ago, but had to give up his position when him and Rose went back home to his ranch. So, we need to vote on a fifth member and soon."

"Isn't Mr. Pope the gentleman who donated the school?" Jennie was confused. Did they remove him from the council or did he quit and why?

Miss Addie spoke up. "I'll fill you in on that when we have our tea soon. It's a long, interesting story, one you will be quite entertained with. I'm sure as a teacher, you will find the story of particular interest, so plan a full day when you come to visit me."

They left soon after. Jennie was anxious to get back to the school now that she had her schedule. School would start in the morning and she wanted everything to be perfect.

Alone in the classroom, she looked around with pride. She clasped her hands behind her back. No longer having to share a room full of students with another teacher, she realized she didn't have to ask permission to move a box of pencils or buy more chalk. She had the power to control all of these things. A giddy feeling ran through her. This was indeed exciting. It was a blessing to be away from scrupulous and bossy schoolmarms.

She did have to deal with the town council for the things she needed, though. She planned to attend every single meeting so they would get to know her and see how important she took her position here. Perhaps after she found her treasure, she'd settle here in this lovely place. So far she had felt welcomed by the women of Mill Ridge.

Running down the back stairs, Jennie plucked some wild flowers and bluebonnets from the field adjacent to the school. After gathering a handful, she moved towards the stairs when she noticed, maybe not noticed, but felt someone watching her.

She turned to see who it was.

That fast, the shadowed image was gone.

What in the world? After staring at the place she thought someone was watching her from, she shrugged, and kept moving towards the steps, deciding she was seeing things. Should she be worried? Jennie did no wrong except pick flowers from an empty field. Noting wrong with that, was there?

It wasn't that she felt afraid, far from it.

There were no hairs standing straight up on the back of her neck.

Perhaps someone from town was curious about the new teacher.

That's it, she realized. She was new and in small towns, curiosity got the best of people. It may be one of her future students wondering about their new teacher. Smiling, she turned to go back inside the school room, anxious to fill a vase with flowers for her students in the morning. She wanted the bright colors to be the first thing they noticed when they walked into their new classroom.

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Jennie stood at the front of the building. It had only been about three minutes since she rang the bell for school. Her hands shook so she clasped them together. Footsteps were heard pounding the gravel.

There they were, her first students! Three children, two boys and a girl, began to rush towards her. Both boy's pants were held up by black suspenders. They took the steps two at a time and stopped dead in front of her. When she looked down, she formed a smile as mismatched socks stood out like a sore thumb. Jennie stifled a laugh. It wasn't polite because one never knew why people did what they did, perhaps it was all they had.

The girl, a few years younger than the boys, curtsied. "Hello, Miss Williams. My name is Bess and these are my two brothers, Roger and Mark." She held her hand in front of her mouth so her brothers weren't able to read her lips. "They don't listen. Ma said to stand them in the corner if they need dissing!"

Jennie tried to keep a poker face. "You mean discipline?"

Bess nodded her head up and down quickly. "Yes, that's what Ma says to do." Instead of waiting for permission, she turned and marched

inside.

Jennie stayed out front, waiting, as five more students showed up. “Go on in and take a look around. We’ll begin in a few minutes.” Jennie wore a pendant around her neck with a small watch hanging from a gold chain. It helped her time her classes and students in Pittsburgh and would come in real handy here.

After several parents introduced themselves, dropping off their children, Jennie deemed it was time to get started.

She stood at the door for several more minutes just to make sure all of the students due had arrived. Sheriff Nightingale stood on his porch across the street, watching as his wife crossed and walked towards the center of town. He didn’t take his eyes off of her until she was out of sight.

Jennie waved but he was not paying attention. She turned to go inside and caught a shadow from the corner of her eye. It was slight and fast and when Jennie looked again, there was nothing there. She lifted her skirts and went down the steps, walking quickly to see who had been at the corner of the schoolhouse. “Hello? Anyone there?”

No one was there.

In the short amount of time it took her to get to the corner of the building, no one would’ve had time to get out of sight and yet there was no one within eyesight. Strange.

Jennie frowned. Was she going crazy?

“Anything wrong, Miss Williams?”

The sheriff was no longer on his porch. She turned to see him striding towards her.

“I thought I saw someone standing here but I guess I was mistaken.”

The sheriff took a look around, eyeing the side of the school house. There was really no where to hide if someone had been there. The side of the building was bare except for two small bushes that weren’t large enough to hide a person. Even if they crouched down, an arm or leg was bound to stick out. “Maybe the sunlight cast shadows from the church or something,” the sheriff told her. “Ain’t nobody close as far as I can see.”

“I better get classes started. Thank you for looking out for our school, Sheriff Nightingale.”

“My pleasure. I’ll take a walk around to make sure, just to be on the safe side. You never know.”

Jennie hurried inside, already chaos stirring. With fourteen students, a mix between boys and girls, young and old, she was expecting to have her hands full.

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Mack held his breath, crouched down behind the small bush along the side of the school. He had been in some weird positions before but never practically doubled himself in half to hide from anyone. No one would suspect an adult was able to hide here, especially one the size of him.

In his job as a Pinkerton, he had been in some pretty strange places. Yet, he wasn’t sure how he was going to get out of this position.

“Need some help,” Sheriff Nightingale asked, holding out his hand.

If Mack were able to talk, he’d have refused, but in the position he was in, with his arms and legs all wrapped around themselves, his windpipe was pushed against his throat. All he was able to do is nod.

The Sheriff guffawed and jerked him upright. It almost knocked the wind right out of him.

When Mack caught his breath, he grumbled. “Nice and easy there, Sheriff.”

“Any reason you are sneaking around a school filled with children?”

Mack had been watching Jennie, wanting to learn her routine. He had to learn her normal, everyday movement in order to know when she was going to try to search for the book. He’d like to get a hold of that map she supposedly had.

Mack shrugged. “I’m doing some investigative work.”

The sheriff stared at him, even though he held a grin for quite some time. “From my point of view, it looked like you are spying on Miss Williams. Is she part of your investigation?”

Did he suspect so? “Everyone is always a suspect.”

The sheriff gave a slow nod. It would take a lot to fool the man.

“My office is right over there, across the street.”

“I know where your office is, I was there yesterday.”

“Good. Then you know I keep my eye on this school for any suspicious activity. You’d best remember that.”

“I understand.” It was all Mack said. He’d like to get the sheriff on board. The man was sharp and he could use the help finding the certificates. Except he didn’t want anyone to know the teacher was inadvertently involved. He wasn’t even sure of her motive at this point. There would have to be a little more investigating before he involved anyone else.

The sheriff nodded, turned to go and then looked back. He laughed. “I wouldn’t try that position again, Mack. You may get stuck with your head up your -”

“Sheriff! Help!”

Mack was glad the sheriff got called off even if it was a desperate shout out. He followed along in case his help was needed as well.

A large cow was muddling his way down the street, chewing on some bright red material.

A middle-aged woman with her hair covered by a bright yellow bonnet was waving her arms back and forth. “He stole my clothes! Right off the wash line! Someone get that darn cow!”

Mack shook his head, moving towards the runaway cow. “You don’t look the least bit surprised, Sheriff? I assume this has happened before.”

The sheriff nodded. “It’s Fergenson’s milk cow. They live on the edge of town, have a fenced yard for the cow but she keeps breaking out. Takes her nose and opens the gate. This happens at least twice a week. It’s why most people don’t do their laundry on Monday or Wednesday. Clarissa likes to take a walk on those days.”

Mack grinned. He had seen it all but when this particular cow strode down main street without a care in the world, it made him laugh.

Shaking his head, he approached Clarissa, talking to her in a

soothing tone while the sheriff slipped a rope over her head. Although they nudged her to follow, there was no getting her to redirect and turn around. “Looks like she’s going to be stubborn today.” The sheriff let go of the rope. “May as well let her do her thing. She’ll head back sooner or later.”

Mack watched Clarissa trudge through the street, belching out a moo here and there, getting pats on the head by a few townsfolk. They were used to seeing her, he guessed.

“You make sure you heed my words, Mack. No more scaring the teacher.”

“I didn’t try to scare her, Sheriff. She has sharp ears, I was as quiet as usual. Maybe I’m getting lax in my old age. Good thing this will be my last case.”

He didn’t want to mention that. With his mind on Miss Williams, he wasn’t thinking on his toes. Mack never divulged any information about his private life. What was wrong with him?

“Oh, is that right? You planning on sticking around here?”

Mack shrugged. “Not sure. Although I’ve been offered a house for sale by your local title agent.”

Sheriff Nightingale grinned. “It’s been offered to about four different people so far. If you’re planning to stay may as well buy it up now before someone else nabs the place. Heard it’s going at a bargain rate.”

Mack wondered what it would be like to stay in one place, to put down roots. This town was quiet, it didn’t feel like he had to prove himself here since most folks kept to themselves. Chicago was a busy city, the hustle and bustle of everyday living had been hard on a man like him. He preferred wide open spaces.

It was why he always volunteered to take the worst cases when they came up at the Pinkerton Agency. It had given him the reputation of being ruthless. Yet, all he had wanted was time away from the busy city.

His sister was being paid good money to be taken care of by the couple he had hired in Dallas. What if he bought the house here, retired from the agency and settled down. Put down some roots. Was

he equipped to take care of her and the child? He knew nothing about a small child. Or a woman who was about to go off the edge of reality. Not that it was his sister's fault. She hadn't spoken a word since being accosted and kidnapped by John Abbott.

She took care of her little one, he had to give her that but she wasn't able to be on her own. She wandered off at times, with no intent to go anywhere special. The couple had to constantly keep her inside unless they were with her. Was that a way to live? Here, townsfolk looked out for each other. Look how they made sure Clarissa the cow was taken care of. He had a lot of thinking to do.

Mack walked by the house that was to be sold next week. A family had lived there, except they didn't want to be in this small town environment. They had preferred the city.

Mack stood outside the gray two story building, it's front porch rails painted white. A large rocker sat on the front porch. He pictured himself sitting there, watching the street, day after day, waiting for Miss Williams to stroll by on her way to school.

He shook his head, blinking several times, trying to figure out where he fit in here. Right now he had a job to do. That reward money was burning a hole in his pocket. Once he found the treasure then and only then he'd make any permanent plans.

Right now, he had to keep his eye on a woman about to make a move.

Chapter 5

"Good day," she told Bess, waving, glad the last of her students were gone.

Jennie stuck her head out the door and peeked around the corner of the school building to make sure that ever present shadow was no where close by. It was good the school sat by itself behind the open field. That way it wasn't right on the main street. Jennie preferred a bit of privacy, especially now. She hurried back inside when it seemed the area around her school was secure. That feeling of someone watching her had gone on for the past week. Today, she figured it was okay since the tiny hairs on her neck hadn't spiked all day long. Hopefully, the person watching her was taking a break. She wondered if one of the parents or someone from the town council was keeping an eye on her, making sure she was doing a good job.

She didn't blame them if they did but wished they chose another way to spy on her, not liking the feeling of being watched while here.

Jennie shuffled some books on the shelf closest to her desk. She pulled out *Rose In Bloom by Louisa May Alcott*, one of her favorite new books. Its pages were all intact since she hadn't read it to her class yet. Not only was the book a precious commodity as far as Jennie was concerned, it held the main reason she was here.

Sitting at the desk, Jennie swept her eyes over the windows, just to be sure no one peeked in. She was so nervous but finding the treasure meant the world to her.

Taking a deep breath, Jennie opened the book to page one hundred, staring at the folded map, shifting her eyes back and forth, taking another quick look around. She almost giggled out loud, realizing she was being presumptuous. There was no one here in town who would even think she was pulling out a secret map that would

help her find a buried treasure!

She was over reacting, like her nature. For all she presented, the town wanted a good, reliable decent schoolmarm who was willing to teach their children the basics. She'd been here almost a week and everything seemed perfect.

Now it was time to start investigating. This map, handed to her by her own mother before she died, was the catalyst that would bring the Williams legacy to light. Her mother wanted her great-grandmother's life to mean something and Jennie was willing to make sure it did.

Jennie smoothed the creases in the map. She lit an oil lamp in order to see better. It's light glow shone down on the yellowing paper.

Disappointment rose up like a garden flower that didn't bloom. There was hardly anything on the map. It looked like a road, a river and an x along the river. There were a few more marks but she had no clue what any of it meant. In the top right corner of the map were a few lines of words, written so small and so poorly, Jennie squinted to read the penmanship.

A fire raged

A man went down

Not in the streets

But outside of town!

She sat staring at the words, baffled. How would she find out where this place was? The x on the map was clearly the place where the book was supposedly buried. But this road, it may be any road.

After doing her diligent research, she knew John Abbott's last days were spent here in Mill Ridge. This had to be the right place. Yet, she had no clue where to start.

A fire raged! What did it mean? Had there been a fire?

A man went down? Did someone die in the fire?

How was she going to find out without causing suspicion? She hated to use her students but perhaps they would know about such a fire. She'd ask in the morning when they talked about safety in the classroom.

Taking the ends of the priceless map, carefully folding them together, she placed the sheet of paper back inside the book and

moved it to another position on the book shelf. Jennie peeked out the windows on each side of the schoolhouse to make sure no one was lurking about. She had finally let the map out of her sight, realizing it would be much safer if she kept it in one place. No one read her books without permission so that was the safest place she knew.

The person lurking about was probably sent by the town council to keep an eye on her. After all, no one knew about the map or the treasure except for her. Her mother had made sure there were only two people who knew when she was blackmailed and the other party had already died.

John Abbott.

A shadow crossed over the far window. Jennie jumped, stifling a scream. Her hand shot across her mouth. She was indeed tired of this nonsense. Whoever was out there was going to get a mouthful!

Enough was enough! She moved quietly and quickly to the back, pulling open the door in slow motion. She was going to find the culprit once and for all.

Jennie went down the few steps on her tip-toes, careful not to draw attention. She gathered her skirts close, lifting them up so they didn't swoosh on the stairs and make any noise. She turned the corner to come up against a hard chest.

"Ah ha! I caught you!" What in the world was he doing here? In the back of her school house?

Pushing herself away, she looked up to find him staring at her, a little shocked and yes, with those dark eyes again. She took a few more steps away, determined not to get caught up in his mesmerizing stare.

A girl could come quite addicted to being in his arms.

She shook herself.

Mr. Everett was obviously trespassing on school property. Why?

Determined to make him squirm, she crossed her arms, raising one brow in question.

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "You must be wondering why I am here, behind the school?"

"Indeed I am."

“I was wanting to ask you to the church social tonight?”

“The school has a front door. Why didn’t you use it?”

“The sheriff told me you had seen someone lurking around lately. I took a walk around the building before coming to speak with you and then you came crashing into me.”

Jennie was almost embarrassed she had questioned his intentions. He was a true gentleman looking out for her. “I apologize for jumping to conclusions.”

“So, will you?”

She had turned away, ready to go back inside and douse the lamp to close up for the day. Jennie swung around. “Will, I, what?”

“Go to the church social?”

“We do have supper in the same boarding house, Mr. Everett. Why make a special trip here when we’d be seeing each other then?”

He grinned. “I didn’t want no one else to beat me to it.”

His words were honest and sincere. Jennie almost blushed. She smiled. “I’d be delighted. Now, if you don’t mind, I must close up.”

“I’ll wait and walk you back.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she told him, heading back up the stairs.

“I insist, it’s the least I can do for scaring you,” he told her, following her up the stairs and into the school room. “Besides, the sun is starting to set and you should never walk home in the dark.”

“I do admit I stayed here way past my regular hours.” Jennie cleaned up her desk, placing a few items in her arms. She blew out the oil lamp, replacing it on the counter.

“Why is that?” he asked, running a hand along the chalkboard.

“No special reason,” she mumbled, looking at the bookshelf. When she realized the interest his eyes held, she quickly looked everywhere but the place where her precious map was hidden.

Mr. Everett moved slowly toward the bookshelf. He turned his back to her, running a hand along the shelf, pulling the tip of a book forward to read the title. She stood frozen, watching as he did it to each book, getting closer and closer to her map. The hairs on her back definitely stood straight on end.

The room was so quiet, if a pin dropped it would sound as loud as the bell she rang each morning.

She wanted to call out to him, tell him to keep his hands off her books but at the same time did not want to draw any attention to her hidden book. Because then he'd find her map, the one thing she had promised her mother she'd never let out of her sight.

She raised her voice. "Mr. Everett, I'm ready when you are." He looked up quickly, then back down to the shelf. Jennie began to chew her bottom lip. Oh dear, what is wrong with me? He doesn't know! He can't possibly know anything!

Relief tugged at her when he took a step back. Without being able to read his expression, he said, "Well, then, let's be on our way."

She took his arm, almost pulling him from the schoolroom, pausing only to lock the front door. Depositing the key in her pocket, Jennie hurried down the steps and didn't look back.

Mr. Everett was quiet. She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He had to have noticed her nervous behavior. She could tell him being alone with him made her uneasy but doubted he would buy that theory. She hadn't been afraid out on the porch, under the stars, had she?

As a matter of fact the thought of the other night under the stars made her shiver in spite of herself as they walked towards the boarding house. Jennie sighed. These emotions were getting out of hand. She was here to find the treasure, restore her grandmother's name to the side of the Williams family and figure out her future after that was done.

There was no room for a romance with an unlikely hero. Jennie giggled at the thought. More like an unknown hero since he had no clue she was lolly-gagging about him this way. She slapped a hand over her mouth.

Mr. Everett was sharp. He seemed to notice every detail, every movement she made. In spite of the fact he noticed everything about her, he stayed silent, a grin on his face as he escorted her down the street.

Perhaps it was time to learn more about this man. "Mr. Everett,

what brought you to Mill Ridge?"

His body stiffened. Jennie thought that odd, it was a normal, everyday question. Why didn't he like to talk about himself?

"I was passing through," he admitted. "Except now I'm starting to think this may be a good place for my sister and her daughter to live."

Jennie was curious. "Do they live close by?"

He nodded. "Dallas. My sister is not well. Perhaps this environment will be good for her, make her healthy again. Small town living compared to a big city is what she needs. She doesn't like loud noises. Even though she lives on the edge of the city, she won't get on a train or take her daughter to any social events."

Jennie had no idea. He seemed like a loner. "I'm so sorry. Is it possible to relocate her here without worry?" The possibility of Mr. Everett living in the same town was good news. Maybe she would stay after all. After she located the book and settled in her own home.

She wanted to know more but they were approaching the boarding house. Sadie was on the front porch waving at her. "Oh, Miss Williams! I'm so glad you are here. I have a letter for you!"

Jennie reached for the letter, which was most likely from her brother. Even though he was cold hearted, she was certain he'd still make sure she reached her destination.

She frowned when she noticed it was from her attorney. "If you will excuse me," she told the two of them and quickly found her way to the privacy of her room.

Jennie sat on the edge of the bed, tearing the letter open. Disappointment that her brother hadn't inquired after her well being struck a chord. He hated anyone who didn't side with him. She had always wanted to know the history of her mother's side of the family, which ultimately made her brother furious and what tore them apart. He wanted the Vanderbilt's to notice him so bad but they had always ignored his good intentions.

Why did her brother think by erasing someone's past, the elite would cater to him? It saddened Jennie's heart to realize the greed her brother had, not for wealth but for position.

Dear Miss Williams,

As your former attorney, I am notifying you of my position in this last letter. Since I am now exclusive to the William's Company since you signed your share of the business to your brother, I can no longer provide you with any services at all as it would be a conflict of interest with this company.

I know you expected me to take care of your monies and to deposit to your bank account but since I am no longer your attorney, I have enclosed a cashier's check for the remainder in your bank account and your half of the buy out proceeds. The account you had from the company was closed in full. Therefore, if it is my last advice to you, please deposit this check immediately in said bank in the town of Mill Ridge. I would also advise you to keep mum about the amount as there are those who are scrupulous and will steal from you once they know how much you are worth. Please, as your former advisor, I insist you be discreet and take care of yourself.

Best wishes for success in your new teaching position. May you find what you are after. I am going to be blunt this one last time and then ask that you burn this letter and never contact me again. There may or may not have been a Pinkerton agent hired to make sure the book you are searching for is never brought to light, although I can't be one hundred percent certain.

Sincerely,

Mr. William Smith III

A Pinkerton agent! Her brother was indeed a snake in the grass! How had he known about the book unless he found the blackmail letters written to her mother. Jennie had thought they were all gone but maybe not. When her mother died, it was possible she had left the letters in a drawer somewhere. Jennie had never allowed anyone to touch her mother's personal belongings. Once she was gone, she was sure her brother's wife wanted all her mother's things destroyed. They must've found the letters.

Jennie let the tears run down her face. A part of her life was over for good. There was no going back now, even if she wanted to. In his own way, Mr. Smith had tried to look out for her, yet, in the end, he was a company man and he always made sure the company was his

top priority. At least in his kindness, he let her know about the Pinkerton man.

Pittsburgh was no longer her home, her brother got his wish to be rid of Jennie, but she made a promise to her mother that she would find the book to restore her great-grandmother's legacy. Someday, her grand-mother's face would be plastered all over their family history! She made that promise and Jennie was bound to keep her word.

Supper had been an uneventful hour long torture as she was too distracted to be attentive. Most of the renters talked about the church social, glad to have some music, dancing and desert to break up their day. Jennie wasn't even sure she wanted to go except she promised Mr. Everett she'd be there.

"Is everyone ready to go to the Church?" Sadie was so excited to lead this group. "If you all want to wait on the porch, I'll clean up and we can all walk there together."

Heads nodded.

"Let me help," Jennie offered.

"That's kind of you. Miss Addie said she will send me another girl as soon as she can hire someone. It gets busy at times."

Jennie gathered the dishes from the table. "I don't mind, really. After all, the town pays for my room. I must be able to return the favor somehow."

"That's kind of you, Jennie. I may call you Jennie?"

"Of course." She smiled. "Some of my students call me Miss Jennie. There are several who have a hard time pronouncing Williams. One of the younger ones called me Miss Willies until I mentioned my first name."

The two laughed as they finished up the dishes, clearing the table and sweeping the floor. Most of the renters had waited patiently. Mr. Everett was among them, Jennie noticed.

When he saw her come out to the porch, he stood, making his way to her before any of the other men attached themselves. He held out his arm. "Ready?"

She tucked her arm in his. "Yes, this may be fun."

It was fun. After several dances, along with a large slice of pie,

Jennie was enjoying every moment. Mr. Everett seemed to be, too. Even though she had worried about him showing up the way he did at the school, she didn't want to be suspicious of him. He was really and truly a nice man.

Except the way he had looked at her, then the book shelf, then back at her still made her feel uneasy. How was it she was attracted to a man she didn't trust. This was silly!

He was smiling at her as if there was no one else on earth as important as her right now.

His eyes sparkled when she gazed at him.

His body language told her he was happy she was here, with him, able to enjoy the evening with her.

Why was she nervous, then?

She had to stop. It was her own worries that made her nervous. That's all.

"Miss Williams, are you enjoying the evening?" Sheriff Nightingale and his wife Sophie stopped by the table where they were enjoying a slice of pie. Here was an opportunity to see if Mr. Everett had bad intentions.

"Yes, I am." She leaned away from Mr. Everett on purpose, speaking quietly to the sheriff, yet loud enough to make sure her escort heard the next words. "Excuse me, Sheriff, I was wondering if you might escort me to the bank tomorrow morning before school? I received a check in the mail I'd like to deposit."

"Yes, of course. Shall I meet you at the boarding house?"

"Yes, that will be nice, thank you."

"I can stay with the children while you take care of your business," Sophie offered. Her long, almost black hair was polished, every single piece in place, a lovely lace ribbon holding it away from her face.

"I would appreciate if you would. Thank you." Now, all she had to do was slip away this evening to get her map. If her instincts were correct, she knew he had wondered what was on the shelf in one of those books. Jennie didn't want to believe he was up to no good but the way he had eyed those books scared her. So, if that was the case, she had better make sure her map was safe and away from the shelf. If

he thought she was busy first thing in the morning, he'd go there to steal the map. By asking the sheriff to meet her, meant he'd have to leave his office early. When he walked outside, if there was any shenanigans going on at the school, the sheriff would catch him. It was a good plan.

For tonight, she needed to get back to the school for the map. A half hour later, she feigned exhaustion and asked Mr. Everett to take her back to the boarding house.

"I'm in agreement, it has been lovely but a long night. Shall we?" He was enjoying himself. Yet, there was this distance in his eyes that she wondered about.

They hadn't talked much all night.

At the front door to the boarding house, Jennie waited for him to make a move. She was suspicious of him and yet she wanted him to kiss her. How wrong was this?

Instead, she tried to make small talk. "I think it is fine if you call me Jennie. Most people are aware we have been out and about together." She didn't know if it was proper or not but most people from this town didn't care much about propriety. Not like back in Pittsburgh. It was actually refreshing not to have to worry about what the next person said or thought.

"Well, then, Jennie it is. Call me Mack."

"Mack." She liked the way his name sounded. She loved even more the way he said her name, the way it rolled from his mouth as if he were calling for her to come closer. *Not now!* She had more work to do, there was no way she was getting lost in those dark eyes again!

"Goodnight, Mack," she said, then slipped through the door and disappeared from view. She ran up the steps as fast as possible.

Jennie, her back against the closed door, heard his footsteps on the stairs. Was he going to knock on her door?

Should she be worried?

"Goodnight, Jennie." His soft voice crept in through the cracks in the door.

She sighed in relief when she heard his door close. Jennie knew he was right down the hall but with the house so quiet, it hadn't occurred

to her how close.

Now all she had to do was get her map from the school this evening while no one paid attention. She wanted to take it to the bank for safe keeping in a safe deposit box until it was needed. There were questions to ask, some research to be done before the map did her any good. Meanwhile, it was up to Jennie to protect the map.

She waited for a few more heartbeats, then slid open the door, hoping it would not make any noise. A sigh of relief passed over her when the door opened with a whoosh of air and that was all.

Once she got outside, Jennie let out the breath she was holding. It had made her dizzy but she sucked in some of the fresh night air before lifting her skirts and running down the street, keeping to the shadows.

How was she going to pass through the empty field beside the church since it wasn't empty. Even though there were townsfolk leaving the social, a crowd was still there, mingling around, enjoying the late evening events.

Jennie made her way through a space between two houses, then turned the corner and crept around the back of the church. She was hidden in the shadows, hoping no one noticed her. This creeping around was harrowing, she thought to herself, wondering about the shadows she had seen before. The person that had been watching her was good at hiding, never getting caught. This was no fun at all.

Had Mr. Everett, or Mack, as he wanted to be called, been hiding in the shadows watching her? It was strange how he had been at the back of the school, right after she saw a shadow through the windows. The more she thought about things, she remembered the letter from Mr. Smith.

A Pinkerton agent had been hired to make sure the book is destroyed.

Destroyed!

Was Mack the Pinkerton agent? What did anyone know about him? He was as new as she was to Mill Ridge. He said he was passing through but he may stay because he wanted to find a home for his sister. The story sounded made up. Did he even have a sister?

Jennie snuck around the back of the school, making her way up the stairs. She let herself in, stuffing the key back in the deep pocket of her dress. Rummaging around, she made her way in the dark, bumping in to her own desk. “Ouch!”

With no time to waste, Jennie felt her way to the book shelf, counting the books until she reached the one that held the map. Here it is, she whispered. Instead of turning pages to retrieve the map, Jennie took the whole book. She left through the back door, relocking and hurrying down the stairs.

Instead of sneaking back through the alley, she decided to walk down the street, pretending she forgot a book if anyone asked. Holding it secure in her arm, the book tight against her, Jennie nodded to a few townsfolk who were cleaning up the tables in the now empty lot. Most people had gone home from the social. “Good evening,” she said, walking faster. She didn’t want to be rude, but there was no way she was staying to help.

Jennie needed to get this book back to the safety of her room.

Chapter 6

*T*he moment he stepped on the porch Mack let out a sigh of relief. He was lucky he had found an alley that brought him straight to the boarding house. Mack had arrived a few scant seconds before she did.

He watched from the shadows as she made her way up the street. The book was in her hands. Mack noticed how she looked nervous, her eyes darting back and forth as if she were watching for someone in the shadows.

She knew someone was watching her. Did she know it was him? He didn't like making her afraid. Then she was there, on the stairs, ready to go inside. He had to slow her down, he needed to keep an eye on that book. "I didn't know you went out again," Mack spoke out loud.

Jennie jumped in the air and squealed, the pitch so high it made his ears twitch. "Mack! You scared the daylights out of me! I thought you were a stranger!"

"A stranger? No stranger here. What do you have there?"

She placed the book closer to her. "I forgot an important book from the school so I had to go back."

"Why didn't you say so? I'd have gone with you, Jennie. Walking by yourself at night is not a good idea."

She sounded even more nervous than before. "Well, I know but I didn't want to bother you. It only took a moment and there were still townsfolk at the church. I forgot I'm giving a lesson on this book tomorrow. I wanted to brush up on my reading skills."

She was way too nervous. That was *the* book. Was something hidden inside or was it the treasure? He had to find out. He stood, towering over her. He hated she was biting her bottom lip. He wanted so bad to rub a thumb across her mouth, tell her not to be afraid.

He had a job to do!

Was it worth risking her hating him?

He let out a deep sigh. His last job, more money than he'd ever had before. It would help him provide for his sister's future. His niece, too. He had no choice. Those rail road certificates were either in the book or somewhere close by.

"What story are you reading?"

"Oh, it's not all that interesting."

He chuckled. "No? Can I see it?"

Her eyes opened wide and then she smiled. A slow, even smile that made him wonder what she was doing. She shoved the book in his hand. He had no choice but to take it.

"You can read it, have a good night." She turned and flew in through the door before he had a chance to say a word.

He looked at the book, an interesting reading book for girls by Mary something or other. Mack knew in an instant it wasn't the book the William's family wanted destroyed.

"She tricked me," he groaned. He paged through the book, knowing the map was what she had hid inside, which was no longer there.

She had pulled it out of the pages of the book before handing it to him. How had she done that unless she stuck the map in her pocket as she walked back here. How was he going to get the map without accosting Jennie?

Mack went inside to find a pot of coffee left over from supper time sitting on the now cold cook stove. He poured himself a cup of the lucid drink, knowing it would keep him awake, even if it was cold. She wasn't leaving this house without him knowing about it.

He'd have to stand watch all night.

Mack looked at the parlor furniture. It was lumpy and not very comfortable. He doubted the settee was meant for a man his size to get comfortable on.

There were two things that had to happen. He needed the map to find the treasure that held the book that held the certificates, or, he was going to let her lead him to the treasure. Either way, she wasn't leaving here without getting by him.

He had a feeling she was about to make a move.

Two weeks later, he was saying the same thing. Mack slept during the day while she taught school. At night, he lounged on the settee, waiting, wondering when she was going to make a move. From his position, no one, not even the proprietor of the boarding house saw him lurking in the corner. He had always gone to his room and then double-tracked back after everyone was settled in for the night. He had a perfect view of the stairs, so he'd know the moment she left the house.

Mack's eyelids began to close when he heard the click of her door. The sound was so loud he was afraid it would wake up the rest of the renters. He sucked in a deep breath, even though he knew she wouldn't be able to see him from where he hid in the dark. His heart raced in his ears, she was finally going to make a move.

Mack watched her come down the steps, tip-toeing, looking around, then darting out the front door. He got up carefully and followed, careful not to engage the lock. He left the door ajar like she had so they both were able to get back inside.

Mack stayed about a half block behind. She made it through one of the alleys then about halfway down, she slipped out of sight. Now what was she doing?

He worked his way along the alleyway, checking each dark spot, trying to figure out where she went. When she heard a soft whistle, he turned around, realizing she was back out on the street behind him.

Waving at him, he stood there, careful not to move. What in the dickens was she doing? "Jennie!"

"Best be quiet," she told him in a loud whisper. "You don't want to wake anyone up." She giggled and then darted back towards the boarding house.

He ran through the alley, trying not to bump into anything that would have the neighbors coming outside with shotguns. When he cleared the alley, he took long strides and began to make his way back.

She was in the doorway, laughing.

No, she wouldn't dare!

Yes, she did dare!

“Goodnight, Mack. Sleep well.”

She closed the door.

Closed the darn door.

As in locked tight.

The only way to get inside was to bang on the door and wake up Sadie or the rest of the renters. He wasn’t about to disturb anyone this time of night and she knew this.

Mack grumbled as he made his way down the street. He’d show her! The fact of the matter was, she was pretty darn smart. She had to know he was watching her, keeping her at arms length all this time in order to see where she went digging for the treasure.

Did she know he was a Pinkerton agent? Had Sheriff Nightingale told her? He didn’t rightly tell anyone else who he was but if she’d have asked, he may have told her the truth. He didn’t see how it would hurt since she didn’t know why he was here. Or, did she know? Had she figured it all out?

Mack stumbled across the empty lot and made his way around to the back of the school house. He took out a pin, jiggled the lock and opened the back door. Flipping the small case closed, he stuffed it deep in his pocket. He locked the door and made his way to her desk.

Mack snatched a small lap blanket from a chair. He laid on the floor by the desk, knowing from scoping out the area no one would notice him there. Grumbling again, he covered his shoulders with the blanket, throwing his hat on the teacher’s chair and closed his eyes.

It had been a long two weeks. Barely able to sleep during the day, even though he tried, it was on again, off again, every hour or so. Now that he didn’t have to keep track of her since the map was in her room or on her person, he was going to get a few hours rest.

She thought she was funny locking him out of the boarding house. The joke was on her. Mack was able to sleep anywhere, in any position and he wanted to see her face when she realized he was in her school room.

Yes, sir, it was going to be an interesting morning.

< > < >

Jennie woke late for school. After last nights ordeal, she had stared at the ceiling for hours, feeling bad about locking Mack out. She even went downstairs to let him back in, but he wasn't on the porch. She had waited over twenty minutes but there was no sign of him so she went back to bed.

Jennie hadn't known at first that he was trailing her. After three or four nights, she had listened for his door to open and close. She knew the exact noise it made. How in the world did she know the difference between his door and the one next to his? It didn't matter, she was tuned in to the way it squeaked slightly. None of the other doors did that.

When he didn't leave his room and yet every morning he passed by her on her way to breakfast, she knew he had been in the parlor all night long, waiting for her to leave. For what? To hunt for the treasure? That made her highly suspicious of him. He had to be the one sent for the book.

He had to be the Pinkerton.

Well, she'd show him that he wasn't going to follow her and get away with it. That's why she took him on a wild goose chase last night, then slammed the door in his face.

It had been funny at the time watching the smile leave his face.

Guilt rode up one side of her and down the other.

Working her way downstairs, Jennie grabbed an apple from the table, excusing herself from breakfast. "I'm sorry, Sadie, I've got to get to the school or the children will be there before me!" With those words, she hustled out the door, down the street, almost running to the school house.

The sheriff waved from the porch as his wife ran across the street. Jennie barely glanced at the two since they did the same thing every single morning. She fetched the key from her pocket, making all kinds of noise as she pushed open the door.

Scrambling around like a madwoman, Jennie turned to place a book on her desk when her foot collided with a hard rock. She looked down, then out towards the window to see if the sheriff was still

standing on his porch because there was a lump in the shape of a man lying on the floor right at her desk.

Jennie tried to pry her leg from where she hit the body but an arm snaked out, wrapping itself around her calf. She screeched, her voice barely audible.

Fear shot through her before she decided to take action. There was no way someone was about to accost her in her own classroom! “I’ve worked too hard to let you get away with this!” She picked up two books from her desk, ready to knock them upside the person’s head. Another arm reached out, grabbing the books as if they were a feather and tossing them on the floor.

Oh dear! She hadn’t expected that!

A soft grumble came from under the lap blanket. She knew the voice. “Mack! What are you doing in my school room! How did you get in?”

Whoosh! His arm pulled Jennie off balance and she landed right on top of him. Her face was crushed into his chest. She tried to speak but got a taste of the blanket instead.

Both arms held her, crushing her to his chest. He was wicked.

A smile played across her mouth. She raised her head to see two dark eyes watching her.

They were just as intense as the other time he looked dead into her soul.

She had to break free, stop this crazed man from kissing her because that was exactly what his eyes were telling her. She knew. They spoke to her before.

“Mack, let me go. The children will be here any moment, perhaps even the sheriff. He’s been stopping by to check up on me.”

His arms loosened but he kept them around her. It felt nice. Warm. Then she realized she was in the middle of the floor of her school room!

She scrambled to get up when she heard footsteps. “Get up! Hurry! Get out of here, go out the back!”

“Not until you tell me why you did that to me last night?”

“Mack, I promise, I’ll tell you later.” She picked up the lap blanket

to fold, placing it on the chair. She shooed him with her hands. “Go on, hurry!”

“Promise?”

“Yes, I promise.”

“Eight sharp. On the front porch.”

He dipped his head and gave her a quick kiss on the mouth.

Then he turned and ran to the exit where he slipped out the back door as if he had never been there.

Children ran up the stairs. Usually Jennie was outside to greet them and ask them to walk not run. Oh dear, this was a mixed up mess. She sighed, then pushed her hair back in place.

Taking a deep breath, she hurried out to the stoop, trying to act as if nothing had happened. If anyone knew the antics of their schoolmarm, the town council would probably fire her on the spot. Let’s hope they never find out.

Of all things, a strange young lady showed up during the first hour of class.

She stood at the door watching until Jennie excused herself. “May I help you?”

“Good morning, I’m Erin Steele.”

“Hello. I’m the school teacher, Miss Jennie Williams. How may I help you?”

Erin Steele had sharp green eyes. Her dark brown hair was plastered tight against her scalp, pulled back so tight it was a wonder she was able to blink. Jennie wondered how she did manage to move her brows to make those deep wrinkles on her forehead.

She wore what looked like a plain gray dress with starched collar that pressed against her chin almost. It seemed so drab and dark for a woman so young. She held onto a clip board against her arm, along with a pencil in her other hand. Erin Steele looked like trouble.

“I work for the National Education Association.”

She was right, the woman was trouble.

“How do you do.” Jennie offered her a smile but was rewarded with a set of lips that pursed together.

“I’m here to make sure you are following the standardized

education policies our organization has instituted for all schools in the nation. We like to make sure brand new schools get off to a good start."

Jennie knew she had no choice but to comply. In Pittsburgh, she had read about the association that began in 1857. It seemed that for years nothing much was done and now all of sudden, the organization started sending employees to make sure the mandatory laws were kept by all schools.

They had even set up truant officers to make sure all children and parents followed the law. If the children didn't attend school, they would be sent to one of the reform schools for troublesome kids.

Jennie didn't like it at all but she had no choice. Smiling, she offered Miss Steele a chair at the back of the class. "If you would like to see how I operate, this will be the best space and most comfortable."

Miss Steele sat down, watching every single move Jennie made. Jennie took in a deep breath, determined not to be nervous. After all, the woman was doing her job.

Too bad it would affect the whole classroom for the next few hours.

"Good Morning class."

"Good morning, Miss Jennie!" Everyone in the classroom stood at her prompting. An array of girls were on her right while the boys were on the left side of the room. They all placed their right hand over their hearts to say the Pledge of Allegiance out loud. A few of the children were not able to say all the words but with consistently having them do the pledge every single morning, they were learning. It was only a matter of time before they would be able to memorize this without thinking or stuttering words. Jennie thought they were doing well.

"Miss Williams, may I see you please?"

Why was she interrupting her class? "One moment please. Class, you may be seated. Now, please take out your McGuffey's Famous Readers and I will return shortly."

Jennie made her way to the back of the classroom. She gritted her teeth, knowing this was not uncommon to be called out in front of the class but she didn't like it at all. However, she had been used to this

type of behavior in Pittsburgh. If Miss Steele was trying to anger her, it would not work. She remained poised.

“I see a problem already.”

“Please, explain yourself,” Jennie prompted, even though she didn’t want to know.

Miss Steele put the clip board on her lap and straightened her spine. “There were a few children who were not able to site the pledge. Why have they not been disciplined?”

“Please lower your voice, Miss Steele. This is a school room where they are being taught to learn. I have been here a few weeks as this is a new school so they will need more time to memorize those lines.”

“I see.”

Did she? Because Jennie was looking at a woman who seemed utterly clueless on how teaching worked. “I’m sure if you plan to come back next year, all the children here will know all the lines by then.”

“I plan to be here for the next two weeks. Every single day. Carry on.” She began to make notes on her clipboard, dismissing Jennie.

What! Two weeks! Jennie opened her mouth then let it snap shut. No use arguing with a dim-witted person. She had a feeling this was going to be the longest two weeks ever!

Chapter 7

*"F*ourteen times."

"What? That can't be right."

Jennie nodded. She was on the porch sitting with Mack as promised earlier. Except she had forgotten why she was there, she was so wrapped up in her experience with Miss Steele. "I counted. The woman interrupted my class fourteen times, almost fifteen, but I rang the bell and got the kids out of there before she started in again."

"She sounds awful."

Jennie nodded. "She's frightful. The children are scared of her. She had two of my younger students in tears."

"What did they do? The kids seem pretty harmless."

"How do you know anything about the children?" Jennie asked, immediately suspicious of his actions. Only someone who was hiding in the shadows watching her every move would know the students were well-behaved. She almost forgot he was a hiding-in-the-shadows Pinkerton suspect. They needed to discuss this tonight, also. With two things coming at her, she didn't know how she would ever have time to find the treasure, her main reason for choosing this town to teach in.

A thought occurred to her like a beacon of light. What if she utilized Mack's skills? If he was indeed a Pinkerton, maybe she did need him to help her find the book.

Mack shrugged. "I don't but it seemed like the right thing to say. You are terribly upset."

She had to calm down. "Yes, you are correct. I am upset and will continue to be so for the next two weeks while she is here hoarding over us. I doubt I can stand her in the classroom every single day!"

Mack smiled. "Well then, take the classroom outside."

“What a grand idea. I do need to start getting out of the classroom and begin looking for -” She closed her mouth faster than Miss Steel’s reprimands.

Mack leaned forward. They were both sitting on the bench on the porch. “What do you have to get out to look for?”

If only she could trust him. How was she going to get Mack’s help and yet keep him from taking the book? If he was the man she thought, it was his job to retrieve her treasure. He was a Pinkerton and yet her hopes of finding the place on the map by herself were diminishing more and more each day.

She had asked almost everyone she knew in the last few weeks if they were aware of a fire and no one remembered a fire. She had meant to ask the sheriff but he was always busy with his wife or helping Clarissa the cow get back home.

Did she wait to talk to the sheriff and entrust Mack to help? After all, he was looking for the same thing she was. Except she had no intention of destroying the book or allowing anyone else to destroy her families history. How would they both be able to come out of this on top? The book being destroyed was not an option. Yet, she had to be honest with him in order to get his help.

Jennie let out a sigh.

“We have to talk, Mack.”

“I agree.”

They were alone on the porch. She stood, wringing her hands and paced back and forth. “You agree? Good. I am not sure this is a good place to talk.”

She was worried Miss Steele would find her. The woman’s buggy eyes staring at her classroom all day gave her the creeps. As she walked from school today, she imagined around every corner the woman’s eyes bugging out, staring at her. If was awful. Jennie didn’t know if she would even be able to sleep tonight without that woman’s green eyes invading her dreams!

“We can go to the school.”

Mack’s suggestion was a good idea. It was dark out,with only a few lamps glowing in the windows when she checked up and down the

street. Most families in Mill Ridge were settled in this time of night. There may be a few people out and about but no one would notice if the two walked through town.

At least she hoped Miss Steele wasn't out this evening! The woman would not interfere during after school hours, would she? Jennie would not allow that woman to intimidate her! Although, she had to be careful, Miss Steele was capable of destroying a career she had worked hard for.

"Okay, let's talk at the school." The two walked down the street, arm in arm, nodding to another couple out for an evening stroll. If anyone did take notice, they were not doing anything wrong. They turned at the church, crossing the field and quickly made their way to the steps at the school.

Jennie was still nervous even though she wasn't doing anything wrong. She fumbled with the key until Mack took it from her, brushing his warmth against her skin.

She was barely able to make it inside after his gentle touch. Why was this happening? Sooner or later, Jennie was going to have to confront these feelings. Right now, she had a purpose, a mission to accomplish.

Without much light, Jennie felt her way around the familiar room until she was able to find the oil lamp. When it was lit, it cast the room in shadows. She placed it on the floor and motioned for Mack to sit there with her.

"I don't believe anyone will notice the lamp if I keep it here on the floor, allowing most of the front wall to hide the light. I doubt it can be seen from the street."

Mack grumbled when he had to get down on the hard floor. Instead of sitting, he laid on his side, propping himself up with an arm. It wasn't proper at all for her to be here with him like this. "I should not be here alone with you but we have to talk."

"Talk away."

Why did his voice sound so low and make her feel almost shy? Darn him, was he sounding that way on purpose? Jennie swallowed, then cast a look, ready to reprimand him if he was deliberately trying

to get her attention.

He wasn't.

His eyes were closed and his chest moved up and down. The man was asleep propped on his hand!

She reached over and gave him a shake. "Mack!"

"I'm awake."

"No, your eyes are closed."

"I'm sorry." He pushed himself up in a sitting position, even closer than she wanted him to be. How was she going to discuss this serious subject with him when his warmth was right here, literally on top of her?

"Mack, you need to back up?"

"Why?"

"So we can talk."

He gave her a look and moved back. "Better?"

"Yes, now stay there and don't move."

"Yes, ma'am." He grinned as if knowing his closeness bothered her.

"Mack? I'm going to come right out with my concerns."

"I've been waiting, it almost put me to sleep waiting."

"Not funny." Except he did make her smile. She was taking forever to discuss this serious subject and knew it. Maybe she was afraid he really was the Pinkerton and would insist on keeping the book when they found it. She didn't want him to have that choice. She had to convince him to be on her side.

They would have to come to some type of agreement before any treasure was to be found.

"Jennie, can you tell me why we are here?"

She got right to the point. "I know you are a Pinkerton."

He didn't say a word.

Jennie didn't think he seemed surprised at her words. The detectives were trained to be mysterious and collective. She knew how they were to behave after reading several articles about the agency.

Would he deny he was one of them?

When he spoke, his voice was soft, deep, precise and to the point. "What makes you think so?"

She clutched her hands in her lap, squeezing her fingers so hard she almost yelped out loud.

Mack placed a hand over hers, instantly calming her down. His deep stare didn't help any.

"I received a letter from my former attorney. He hinted a Pinkerton was hired by the family, er, my brother's company to retrieve a certain book I am searching for."

"A book?" He almost smiled. Was she imagining things with him? Would he think she is mad?

"Yes, a book. I know you've been snooping around, watching, waiting for me to find the book."

"Do you have the book?"

"You know I don't. I have the map and it's in safe keeping."

"Which means it is on your person." He leaned in. The darkness that surrounded them cast shadows in the room. "What makes you think it is safe?"

Jennie blushed. She wasn't sure what he meant by that remark. She instantly pulled her hand away, covering the front of her dress. Her eyes widened when his eyes followed her hand. *Oh, dear! I just gave it away!*

She stood! "You wouldn't dare accost me!"

He followed suit until voices in the empty field got louder. She ducked, blowing out the lamp so the room was in total darkness. Mack squatted down, alongside her, listening.

Footsteps got closer to the front door. "I locked it, didn't I?" Jennie's heart pounded so loud she wondered if Mack was able to hear it?

"You did, I checked. Part of being a Pinkerton."

"I knew it!"

"I'm sorry, Jennie. This was to be my last job."

"You're retiring? You look too young?" Her words were whispered. She leaned closer to make sure the persons outside didn't hear them. Hopefully it was someone passing by or just wanting to talk like they were doing.

"I'm retiring from the agency. I'm going to take care of my sister, I

told you about her."

"I wasn't sure if the story about your sister was made up or not after I figured out who you were! It doesn't change the fact I'm not going to hand over the book."

Mack placed a hand over her mouth when the door knob rattled. The dreaded voice of Miss Steele reverberated through the walls. "I know I saw them come in here! I saw two figures right here through the window!"

"Now, now, Miss Steele. It's too late for Miss Williams to be out and about." The sheriff's voice sounded annoyed as the two argued back and forth.

Mack grunted.

Jennie realized Mack's hand was still over her mouth. It was disturbing her even more than Miss Steele was outside ranting. His arm casually around her neck and his hand over her mouth was startling. She needed him to move it but when she tried to pull away, his hand wouldn't budge. So she licked it, causing him to pull away.

They looked at each other and grinned.

"I'm sorry. I didn't realize my hand was still there."

She gave a quick shrug. "It's OK. Listen, they're moving away. What is she saying now?"

Her shrewd voice rattled Jennie's ears. "I checked at the boarding house and she wasn't there. I know she's in there with someone! Sheriff! Take your arm off of me! There is no reason to escort me back!"

Nightingale's voice overrode the instigator. "I'll give you one more chance, Miss Steele. Take yourself and go on home. The school is locked tighter than a cork screw in a bottle! You be on your way or I'm going to have to arrest you for disturbing the peace!"

Her voice faded away but she was giving the sheriff a talking to. Jennie made her way to the window in the dark, watching as they turned the corner. The sheriff turned back one more time. Jennie ducked.

"Come back here," Mack told her.

She made her way around the desk. "I'm getting good at finding my

way in the dark," she grumbled. "What is she going to do now? I swear if she tries to get me fired, I'll file a complaint! She doesn't have to know where I am every single moment." Jennie chewed on her lip. "What am I going to tell her? I have to put up with this woman for the next two weeks?"

"Tell her nothing. You are not obliged to say anything."

"I'm sure you are right. I hope she doesn't have much power but if she files a complaint against me, I may lose my teacher's position. I kind of like it here."

Mack studied her. Well, at least she thought that's what he was doing. "Let's get back to us."

Us, that sounded nice! Wait a minute! "There is no us, Mack."

"If you want me to help you find the book, which is what I believe your plan was, then you need to show me the map."

"What makes you think I want your help?"

"It seems the most likely thing to do. Instead of working against me, you are assuming if we work together, it will be much easier to find the treasure you seek. Now we have a third party butting in, making it impossible for you to get any searching for your treasure done. There's no way you can hunt down a book with Miss Steele bothering you. I believe my assumptions are correct?"

She placed a hand on her hip. He had read her mind! "Very good. I believe you are right. The problem is, you still want the book. You said yourself, it's your last job so I'm assuming you need the money for this job in order to retire?"

He nodded. "Yes, you are correct. The money will help me take care of my sister."

"The problem is, I can't let you have the book. I'm going to be honest. My brother has been trying to wipe out my great-grandmother's legacy since he took over the business. She is part of the Williams family and my mother wanted her legacy to continue on. It is my great-grandmother's book I'm looking for. When she was captured by the Sioux, it was her means of survival. She carried a journal with her, in her pocket and hid the book, writing in it about her capture. My mother wanted to publish it, let the world know. It

means nothing to anyone else."

"Your brother wants it destroyed." Mack stood up before pacing back and forth. She held her hand over the front of her gown. The map was hiding in her dress. Did he know it was there? She wanted to show it to him but wasn't sure if she could trust him yet.

Jennie sighed. "I know he does. The good news is, you don't have to worry about getting him the book. I can pay you double what he offered your agency." If money talked, she just won. She nodded, pursing her lips. He wouldn't refuse double the pay, no one would.

"Jennie, I'm afraid I gave my word. I have to do my job."

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They walked back to the boarding house in silence. Jennie was devastated. Even if she let him help her find the book, he would keep his word. Mack was a man of honor. Her head hurt from too much thinking. There had to be a way around this.

"I'm sorry, Jennie." His words were quiet but spoken from the heart.

She nodded but was unable to speak. Where he spoke from the heart, her own was aching in comparison. She was hoping they would be able to team up. Yet, it wasn't to be. He was a man of honor.

She loved that about him.

Except right at this moment.

He stopped.

She followed suit.

"I guess we must part ways, dear Jennie."

It was the first time he called her dear Jennie. Did he have other feelings for her? She wanted to be honest with him. "I was hoping we would be able to continue to speak to one another even if we are on different paths."

"I am afraid I won't be able to do my job in which I'd have to have you arrested and thrown in jail while I worked if you got in my way. I'd rather not. What I want to do is kiss you."

How did he think it was okay to kiss her and yet not okay to help

her find the treasure. Jennie was so confused.

One kiss, though. What did one kiss matter? It would have to be a goodbye kiss now that he wasn't willing to help her. Before she realized what he was doing, he pulled her to him, stepping back and taking her with him. They were out of sight of anyone walking by. "One last kiss, Jennie, I want to take with me the taste of your lips on mine."

"You sound so poetic."

"Don't speak," and he swooped down and kissed her. Pulling her so close, her heart danced, it's pulse beating so fast she thought it would jump right out her chest.

Jennie had never, ever been kissed like this before. He wrapped his arms around her, delving his tongue in her mouth. All she was capable of thinking about was how wonderful he was, how his mouth on hers made her feel dizzy and off balance and right in his arms! *Oh dear Lord, I'm sorry but yet I am having too much fun to realize I don't care about propriety! Take me now, Pinkerton man!*

She pushed away from him, pushing her hands over the skirt of her dress, just to be doing something. She wanted to run her fingers over her mouth where he had kissed her but didn't. That would be too knowing.

"Now I've seen everything!"

Jennie's eyes widened in shock. Miss Steele was still outside, hiding in the shadows waiting for Jennie to fall from grace. Didn't that woman have other things to keep her busy besides trying to find a reason to fire Jennie?

"This is not good," Jenny whispered to Mack. "I will be accused of behaving like a harlot. According to Miss Steele and most of the association, a teacher is preferred to be single. I doubt she will understand anything else. Especially not a kiss like we shared."

"It was pretty wonderful, and so are you."

Jennie wanted to smile, to ignore Miss Steele but the accusations the woman was about to throw out to the town council may cost her the teaching job. Instead, she moved away from Mack, mouthing the words sorry instead.

He nodded, staying behind the two ladies as they made there way up the street.

Jennie turned back once, giving him a warm smile.

She wasn't sure what to do about Miss Steele yet. Clearly, the woman was harassing her and she wasn't sure why.

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After reassuring Miss Steele there will never be a kiss in public again as long as she taught school, the woman hurried to her room at the boarding house. Jennie didn't like making a promise like that but right now she needed to keep Miss Steele happy and calm.

Miss Steele said she was going to report her findings next week and if Jennie wanted to redeem herself she would allow Miss Steele to help her and guide her in the classroom.

The only reason Jennie agreed was because she had no plans to stay in the classroom. Her mind began to develop plans to make sure each and every day the class did something that included nature and was held outside. That way, her students would not be inside with this stuffy, annoying woman.

Besides, it was time to find the treasure.

Tomorrow she planned to take the kids for a walk across the field on the outskirts of town, perhaps near the creek that ran parallel to town. She'd have them find stones or rocks near the creek and perhaps look around while little minds were busy and Miss Steele was occupied.

She moved quickly up the stairs to her room. Miss Steele's room was directly across from her own. It wasn't reassuring in that the woman knew every move she made. Somehow the lady needed to be distracted. But how?

Maybe she needed a man of her own to keep her busy. But who? Jennie began to undo the buttons of her dress. She opened the first few, then dipped her hand inside to retrieve the folded map she had hid there.

Panic began to ooze from her as she unbuttoned the rest of her

dress and shook it off, feeling along her camisole where she had hidden the map. Shaking out her petticoat, she searched the floor in case it fell from her body while she undressed.

It was not anywhere on her body! She knew without a doubt she had placed it right inside her dress, below the shoulder inside her camisole.

How did it disappear?

It dawned on her so slowly she felt her skin begin to boil from the tips of her toes all the way up her body to the very top of her head!

The Pinkerton!

That kiss!

He had fooled her!

It hadn't been because he wanted to kiss her at all. No, he had watched her body movements, knew the map was on her person. How dare he steal! How did she not know!

Because she was giddy with warmth of his body pressed tight against hers. He had kissed her with his tongue, like no man had ever done before. He had rendered her weak in the knees until Miss Steele came along and broke it up and then when she turned he must have pulled the map from her without much effort.

Jennie was ashamed that she let her guard down so easily.

She was mad he dared to accost her person in such a way!

The idea of him finding the book now before she was able to rose within her like never before. How did she keep Miss Steele at bay and follow that Pinkerton man both at the same time?

Jennie plopped down on the bed. Her mother had wanted Jennie to keep her great grandmother's legacy alive. Jennie made a promise to do so.

It was in the Pinkerton's hands now.

Jennie wasn't about to give up!

If she had to turn the tables on him, then she would. After all, he had kissed her like that to get the map.

It had to be on him now. He wouldn't trust hiding the map anywhere. Maybe he needed a taste of his own medicine!

Chapter 8

*M*ack woke up with a headache the size of a wagon wheel. He sucked in some fresh air, hanging his head out the window that faced Main Street. Perhaps it will help get rid of the nagging ache in his head, he thought, digging in his pants pocket for the treasure map.

Mack studied the map carefully as he took in the morning air. He noticed the staggered writing in the corner.

A fire raged
A man went down
Not in the streets
But outside of town!

What did this mean? If his head had felt better maybe he would be able to think. Mack poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the dresser, then went back to the window, leaning against the wall as he looked out. Two riders slowly made their way down the street.

As they got closer and he could see much clearer, Mack set the glass down and smiled. “No kidding! What are those two doing here?”

He dressed quickly, gulping down the rest of the water and tucked the map back inside his pocket. Mack made his way downstairs, nodding to the others where everyone, including Jennie and Miss Steele, were having breakfast. “You’ll have to forgive me for not joining everyone for breakfast this morning, Miss Sadie. I have to meet someone.”

With that, Mack took his hat from the rack beside the door and made his way down the street. The men’s horses were parked outside the sheriff’s office. Yes, indeed, it was his lucky day!

Mack pushed open the door.

“Mack? What in the world are you doing here?” Noah Holloway

turned when the front door was flung open. Mack noticed how his hand went for his holster out of instinct.

"Wondered the same about you. How are you, Noah?"

The two shook hands and patted each other on the back. Noah turned to the sheriff, who had his feet propped up on his desk, sipping from a cup of coffee. "Sheriff, we had the fortune to work with one of the agency's finest Pinkertons a time or two. How did you get so fortunate to have Mack in your town?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Didn't know I was fortunate." He eyed Mack, never letting his guard down for a moment. Mack didn't blame him, the man had to take care of his town.

Grant Jennings stood in the shadows, away from the door, watching. He had always been the quiet type, watching, waiting. Mack turned to shake his hand as well. "Jennings. You ready to join the Pinkertons yet? I always told you that you'd make a fine agency man."

Jennings shook his hand and his head at the same time. "Afraid I'm retired from all that kind of business. I got me a wife and family now."

Mack wasn't surprised. He'd make a fine husband and family man. Jennings was good at whatever he did. "It's good to see you both. Maybe you two can help me solve a puzzle."

"Always glad to help a Pinkerton," Noah teased. The Pinkertons and Texas Rangers usually avoided each other but in their case, it always turned out better when they worked together to solve a mystery. The three had worked well together on occasion years ago.

Mack pulled out the map and laid it on the table. The sheriff looked over it first. "What do you want to know?"

He placed a finger over the X. "Where this is. There is a building here along the banks of the river. According to the hint we get in these written words, there was a fire outside of town. That could be anywhere."

The sheriff leaned forward, studying the map, reading the words. He nodded to himself and leaned back. "You don't need the Texas Rangers to help. I already know where it is."

Mack's head went back to pounding. He hoped his vision stayed

intact. He needed to get to the treasure before Jennie realized he stole her map. He hated deceiving her, but he had a job to do.

A job he was having second thoughts of finishing.

Was he searching for the treasure for himself or for her now that he knew the whole story?

He had never let the Pinkerton Agency down throughout his whole career. He wasn't that kind of man to cross anyone or for any reason.

When she offered to pay him double, he had no choice but to refuse. Mack had been offered to double-cross many times before. He would never betray his word or his honor.

No matter the reason.

"Mack, you with us?"

He put a hand to his temple. "Sorry, men, headache."

"Looks more like a love-ache." The sheriff's words were probably true. He had never felt this way about any woman before.

"What?" Both Jennings and Holloway spoke at once.

The sheriff laughed. "Seems our Pinkerton has been kissing the teacher in places where he shouldn't be. At least that was the complaint on my desk first thing this morning from Miss Steele."

The men laughed. Matt grinned. He wasn't about to tell them anything more. Let them all think what they wanted.

"Sheriff, I'll meet you back here in an hour if you won't mind showing me where that place on the map is." He folded it up and placed the map back in his pocket, deep in his pocket. He didn't put it past Jennie to try to get it back once she found out.

She probably already knew.

"Good to see you," Noah told him. "Stop out at the ranch any time. After your job is done."

Matt shook his head. "I may do that. Was thinking of buying a house here, settle my sister and niece here."

Noah knew about his sister. He had been one of the Rangers who had helped save her in the end. It was why Mack was indebted to the man.

"It's not a bad place to live. I've got a ranch a few miles from town. Noah has a farm. You are welcome to stop by any time."

Mack felt better knowing two men he had admired and respected lived close by. The town was looking better and better as a place to put down some roots.

As Mack walked down the street, Miss Steele and Jennie walked by. He moved aside for them to get through, tipping his hat. “Good morning, ladies.”

Miss Steele, her nose in the air, murmured while Jennie stared at him with eyes the size of saucers from the local café. She was furious but didn’t dare say so.

He quickly averted his eyes, moving along as quickly as possible. It was time to get some work done. The Pinkerton agency was counting on him.

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“What are you doing here?” Jennie raised her voice in a harsh whisper.

“I’m looking for the treasure.”

“You can’t be serious! If Miss Steele sees you she will certainly fire me!”

Mack pressed himself tight against her. There wasn’t much space in the small shack. Maybe enough room for one person to stand comfortably, not two. There had been a cabin on the land at one time but had been burnt down, hence the fire the clue had mentioned.

“Miss Steele is busy talking with the Sheriff. I thought I’d have to pay him off to be nice to the woman, but he offered to help in the end. He is distracting her while I search for the place the treasure is hidden.”

“You stole my map.”

His warm breath made her shiver. “I’ll admit I did. I had no choice, Jennie. I’m doing the job I was hired for.”

Even though she understood it was not easy being a detective, she didn’t want to accept the fact he had a job to do. She had thought he liked her, even cared but all he had wanted was to get the map at any cost. “You misrepresented yourself to me.”

He nuzzled her neck. “I’m sorry.”

“Stop that! There you go again. Don’t pretend you like me because all you want is what I have!” She tried to sound harsh but it sounded more like she was out of breath.

It certainly didn’t stop him from placing small kisses along her neck. Jennie was weak in the knees from being so close to him.

Someone had built a type of shelter on the corner of the land where the burnt out cabin had once been. Inside, fishing poles were propped in the corner. There was a small area to stand out of the elements. It left little space for more than one person.

“I already have what I need!”

“Then what are you doing?”

“Oh, Jennie.” He replaced her words with his mouth. Jennie thought he would crush his mouth to hers but he didn’t. His lips were soft, gentle, slowly drawing her in. She moved her arms around his neck, bringing him in even closer. If Miss Steele found her like this, her teaching career was over.

She had to stop. Placing her hands on his shoulders, Jennie pushed him away. “It’s a good thing I memorized the map so you taking it didn’t make a difference. I’m sure you wondered how I knew the treasure was here. Sophie stopped by the school to give me support this morning. She told me the story about the fire, and here we are. So, I am well aware the treasure is here, on this land, somewhere.”

She saw Mack’s cheek twitch. “I wasn’t expecting to see your class here.”

“I’m going to get to it first, you know. You don’t stand a chance. My classroom will spend the day here so you may as well leave now. I’m not letting this area out of my sight.”

“Jennie. Meet me later. We’ll come here together and search for the treasure after school is over.”

“Then what? I just hand it over to you? A book that may change my family history? I can’t. You can’t possibly hand the book back to my brother! My great-grandmother deserves to have her voice heard.”

She saw the look on Mack’s face. Had she convinced him how important it was not to destroy the book?

But she recognized the look he gave her. She was able to read it well. He was going to do his job. Then, so was she. “I’m sorry, Mack. I can’t let you get your hands on this book.”

“What are you going to do?” he asked, his voice guarded.

She turned away from him and began to raise her voice. “Sheriff! Sheriff! There’s a man inside the building!” Jennie flailed her hands around, pretending to fan her face when she stepped from the small space. “I went to explore and there he was, a stranger inside the building!”

Nightingale gave her a strange look as he rushed past her. She stood just outside the shack, her hands clasped in front of her. The moment the sheriff went inside, she hurried to Miss Steele’s side. “Let’s move the children away, promptly!”

Miss Steele took charge, helping to gather books and rushing the children downstream as far from the small outer building as possible. They were far enough in the distance, Miss Steele would not be able to recognize Mack when he came out with the sheriff.

Jennie tried to stand in her way so the woman was unable to see, just in case. “Children, let’s all rise and sing one of our songs for Miss Steele. Show her what you have learned. I’ll begin.”

A-tisket a-tasket
A green and yellow basket
I wrote a letter to my love
And on the way I dropped it,
I dropped it, I dropped it,
And on the way I dropped it.

The smiles of the children as they proudly sang, Miss Steele nodding with each word was the perfect distraction. Jennie looked once to see if the sheriff had taken Mack away. She glanced back in relief when two riders were seen leaving, although one was reluctant.

Frustration gnawed at Jennie. Now she’d have to sneak back here after school. It was a quiet area, no other buildings close by. If she left immediately after school was out, she was certain it would give her some daylight hours to explore. But, just in case Mack decided to turn around and come back, she planned to stay here all afternoon so he

would not be able to.

That treasure had to be here somewhere.

When she had memorized the map, Jennie knew the exact spot the X was placed. When she was in the small shanty, she realized the treasure had to be in the rear corner of the blackened area.

Right where she stood kissing Mack.

There was a floor there. How in the world was she going to remove a floor? For the rest of the afternoon, she worried how she would figure it out herself. There had to be a tool to help take up wooden planks. She'd look in her classroom for something to use the moment they went back to the school.

It was going to be a long afternoon. Especially when Miss Steele was staring at her, reprimanding her now for hesitating to sing along.

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Mack was watching the school from the window of the sheriff's office. He was alone since Nightengale had gone home for a late lunch to see Sophie.

Now that the sheriff understood all the details, he wasn't too happy with Mack.

Nightingale had warned Mack before he left. "I don't want you hurting the new teacher. She has taken a liking to you. If you were only kissing her to steal the map, it is a pretty rotten way to do things."

Mack had tried to defend himself. "I assure you. It wasn't solely for the map. When the opportunity came up I ran with it, but, I can't seem to keep myself from kissing her every chance I get."

Even though Salem said he understood, he still chastised Mack. "Don't break her heart. She is an asset to this town and my wife is on the town council, Mack. No matter what Miss Steele says about her, Jennie Williams is here to stay. We're not letting an outsider decide who we hire and not hire, no matter if she's from the Teachers Association or not. She's darn lucky we haven't thrown her out of town."

The sheriff was telling him in a round about way to make sure he doesn't hurt Jennie or he wouldn't be welcome here. Mack realized this but he had a job to do.

Mack felt pulled two ways.

As he sat in the sheriff's chair, watching through the window, a steady stream of children left the school, while a few parents stopped to pick up a few more. Mack counted until he was sure all the children were gone. He was an expert memorizing details and knew the last of the fourteen children were gone. Then, two minutes later, Miss Steele left the building. She walked towards the boarding house, holding that well-known clip board in her arms.

For a moment she glanced his way, her steps faltering as she scrutinized the front of the sheriff's office. He leaned back even though Mack knew she wasn't able to see in the window. The woman flat out scared him.

Once she had disappeared from view, Mack was relieved but kept his eye on the front door. After ten minutes of waiting, he became suspicious. He had been certain Jennie would make a move, go back to the shack.

When he offered to meet her later, he meant to speak to her about the book. She had to understand he had a job to do. He had to convince her to listen to reason. He was going to offer her the chance to read the book before taking it to the agency. Then, she'd be able to get the information she needed, perhaps even copy the important parts she needed for her family legacy. Would Jennie be satisfied with his compromise?

Although, Mr. Pinkerton would take his word if he sent a telegram and said the book was destroyed.

Which made his job even worse.

Except he never deceived anyone, especially a man he knew well and respected.

Besides, he had his honor to think about.

Was it worth his honor?

Mack was caught up in two different situations and he didn't know what to do.

Sheriff Nightingale returned, a dash of lipstick on his collar. Mack smiled. The man never got tired of kissing his wife.

Mack put on his hat.

"Remember what I said," the sheriff warned.

"I understand. I may have thought of a compromise."

When Mack crossed the street, his intention was to confront Jennie and make her understand they both would win if she listened to his compromise. When he tried to enter the school, the door was locked. Peeking in the window, the room was empty. Her usual stack of books she carried home were not there. Mack jiggled the knob to no avail.

She had to have gone ahead of him, leaving by way of the back door. It wasn't that far by foot to get to the burnt homestead.

Mack returned to the sheriff's office to retrieve his mare. It would take him less time to ride there and hopefully catch her before she got to the homestead. Frustration whipped at Mack's soul. He had his mind on her so much he wasn't paying attention and she snuck out right in front of him.

It was time to put a stop to all this secrecy. He was going to convince Jennie it would all work out his way.

Except she wanted it her way.

When he saw her crossing the field, he headed straight towards her until he stopped abruptly. She had a small pistol pointing straight at his heart.

Even though she was standing in the middle of the field, pointing it with both hands, he was about three feet higher on his horse. "Put the gun down, Jennie. You're no match for me."

"I'm not going to let you get my family's book."

"We don't even know if it's there, Jennie. Let me have the gun. We can talk, I have an idea."

"I don't trust no stinking Pinkerton."

Mack sighed. Her hand was wavering. She was scared of the pistol even though being brave by holding it in her hands. "I don't trust that gun not to go off. Have you ever shot a gun before, Jennie?"

"Never," she admitted. "But it won't stop me from firing this thing if I need to. Now go on, let me alone."

“Jennie, please. Point it at the ground before you hurt one of us.”

She shook her head back and forth even though she did point the gun towards the grass. He slid from his mare, careful not to get her riled up any more than what she was already. He had a lot of experience with this. It wouldn’t be hard to take the gun from her shaking fingers.

Moving cautiously, he took a few steps at a time, working his way to her side. Mack took her hand, gently working the gun from her fingers. “I’ll take the gun, darling.” Being so close, he wanted to whisper sweet things to her and kiss those lips.

He had to get a grip on himself. This was no way to take charge. Mack checked the chamber of the pistol, stuffing it in his waist. He took her hand. “Come on, I’ll take you to the property.”

A tear slid down her cheek at his show of kindness. She tried to push his hand away. “I’m so sorry, Mack. I didn’t mean to point a gun at you. I’d never shoot you.”

He helped her up on to the saddle then got up behind her. Wrapping his arms around either side of her, he guided the horse towards the river. He hadn’t said anything when she apologized. He had been too overwrought with emotion to speak.

There was a big part of his heart he never thought he’d open to anyone again. Mack had become a Pinkerton because his parents had been killed by an outlaw gang many years ago. Mack had vowed when he grew up, he was going to do something about it. He did. He became one of the finest Pinkerton agents of his time.

Mack had never wanted to feel such a loss like he had when he lost his parents. So, he never let himself fall in love or get close to anyone else except for his sister and Charlotte.

Mack had guns pulled on him throughout his career. He had ripped guns from the hands of dangerous men and unruly women, even returning fire when they had attacked him. He never, ever had anyone shed a tear because they pointed a gun at him.

Until now.

Until Jennie.

That was the moment he knew his heart had healed from his loss so

long ago. Even though he wanted the treasure, he knew in a heartbeat he would become like the men he had hunted down not to see another tear fall from her beautiful face.

It was why he hadn't said a word.

He had to walk away before he'd allow himself to turn against his own honor. His own loyalty to a badge he had made a promise to many years ago.

She had the power to turn him away from all that he had ever thought he needed or wanted.

With a brush of her mouth against his own, she would be able to change his mind. He did not want her knowing the power she held.

Chapter 9

When Jennie had slipped away from the school, she had known Mack was in the sheriff's office. Leaving by way of the back door had been her plan, since she knew he was very observant if she left through the front door. When the sheriff stood on the porch blocking Mack's view, she took her chance and left, knowing it wouldn't stop Mack from following but at least she had a good head start.

Enough time to dig up the book and get it before he did.

Then he showed up before she had a chance to find the book herself. She knew it was him as the mare galloped through the fields, coming straight towards her. She hadn't fooled anyone for long. He was a Pinkerton, probably used to someone trying to dodge him. Mack sat the horse like someone who was comfortable riding. Not knowing what else to do, she stopped in her tracks, pulling the gun from her pocket and pointed. It was one of the dumbest moves she had ever made.

When Jennie left Pittsburgh, she had bought herself a small pistol for protection. She had read the dime novels and other books depicting life on the prairie and had figured it was a smart move to have one handy for a woman alone, in case of trouble.

She regretted taking it from her pocket and pointing it at Mack the moment she did so. As he closed in, when a tear of regret fell from her cheek, she hadn't wanted him to see how embarrassed she was. The man would not hurt her, she knew that in her heart. Yet, she had pulled a gun on him the moment he showed up today.

Was she so desperate to find the treasure it was turning her into a cruel, cold, heartless woman?

He hadn't said a word when she told him how sorry she was. Did

he now despise her? Did he see her for what she was? A reckless woman who didn't deserve to teach a school full of children when she wasn't able to even control her own emotions!

This book was starting to become a curse more than a treasure.

Mack hadn't said a word, not one word when he pulled the gun out of her hand, or when he helped her on to the horse. They rode in silence until they came upon the burnt out homestead.

He slid from the mare then helped her off. "We need to talk."

It was all he said. His voice was serious, stern, as if he were talking to a stranger. Jennie didn't understand his change of heart. Was he that angry at what she did?

She had to make him understand. "I'm so sorry, Mack. I truly am. Pointing the gun at you was wrong. I hate myself for this."

She turned away, unable to stand it the moment he stared at her with empty eyes. Jennie swallowed hard, clenching her jaw, afraid she would cry out at his lack of understanding, at his silence.

He had cared, hadn't he?

She swore he wanted something more by the way he had held her, kissed her. She was wrong. She had truly thought he had wanted her and now? Now, he was acting as if all that had ever mattered was the book. The treasure.

Is that how a Pinkerton behaved? Had he been lying all this time? Had he pretended he cared for her just to get the book?

She wanted to lash out at him, to make him understand it hadn't been easy for her, either. "I understand you are angry with me. I thought you cared even though your goal was the treasure. Somehow, I thought our relationship meant something, too. Now, I know the truth, you pretended to care to get the map. You used me, didn't you, Mack?"

The sad thing was Mack didn't agree or disagree.

He turned away, toward the area where a cabin once stood. The grass was still black from the fire so long ago. It was almost as if no life would grow in that one area. The crooked shanty someone had built for shelter stood out like a sore thumb. It was right on top of the treasure, according to the map. She stared as he walked towards the

shanty. “We have work to do,” was all he said.

Stunned, her feet frozen to the ground, Jennie placed her fist over her mouth before she cried out. She had put it all out there, and yet Mack had turned away, his only intent to get the book. He never cared. She had been a fool! Utter disappointment and sadness rippled through her whole body. It almost rendered her to sink to her knees but she didn’t.

No.

She was a strong woman. She had traveled alone to this place, determined to find the one thing that would keep her mother’s side of the family legacy alive. Her mother had wanted her families story to be told.

Jennie was not about to let her down.

Mack disappeared inside.

Jennie lifted her skirts and ran to the shanty, determined to get to it first.

If it was truly here.

The thought had occurred to her that John Abbott, the man who buried the treasure, may have lied. People did lie. He had been nothing but an outlaw, trying to bribe her own mother until he died in a gunfight. He may have made all of this up for one simple reason, money. For greed.

It was time to find out.

Jennie didn’t hesitate. She began to pull up the wooden boards, alongside of Mack, who was lifting them up from the floor. They weren’t even nailed down, just placed side by side. They were both crouched down on their knees, determined to be the one to find the treasure.

No words were spoken between the two as they worked diligently to remove all the boards. Dirt and dust covered Jennie’s arms and face but she didn’t dare think of that right now. She listened to Mack’s even, steady breathing. It was nice, calmed her down and yet she was determined not to let it affect her in any way.

He was dead to her.

She had asked him to forgive her and he had ignored her, walked

away from her as if she meant nothing of importance to him.

She would be all business from now on if that's what he wanted.

After the last wooden plank was removed, the two were kneeling on the dirt floor. Mack pulled a long metal tool from his back pocket and began poking the dirt, back and forth, up and down imaginary rows until a hollow sound echoed.

He did it again.

And again.

They looked at each other.

She forgot she was angry with Mack.

"Dig," he told her. She listened, scooping large handfuls of dirt, her heart skipping beat after beat. Unable to even talk at this point, Jennie tossed the dirt aside on a heap, working her hands into the loose ground until it was all gone.

A rusty, metal box lie buried beneath the dirt.

Jennie cried out, almost putting her hand in her mouth before realizing it was caked with dirt. Instead, her hand went to her throat. "This may be it," she whispered.

Mack's gaze softened as she noticed a glimpse of tenderness in his eyes. For a moment there was hope. Then it was gone and he was all business again.

Her heart fell.

But she had to know if the book was in that box.

He dipped his large hands in the hole, dislodging the box until it came free. Brushing dirt from the top and sides, he flipped open the lid.

Mack sat back on his haunches and sighed. "Go on, take a look."

His gentle words stirred her heart but she wasn't going to fall for his softness again. He had told her from the look on his face earlier he was here for business only. This business.

It surprised Jennie he'd let her pick up the book first. At least he trusted her enough not to grab it and run. When she looked down, a brown leather book with ragged edges filled the metal box. Jennie picked it up with shaking fingers, trying to be gentle, careful not to tear the fragile book.

Fascinated, Jennie lifted the cover to find her great-grandmother's name written on the first page.

In the center of the yellowed page, a faded and weathered name stood out, Mabel *Wachiwi* Williams. Jennie placed her fingers over the name, as if her great-grandmother was trying to connect in some way. She didn't realize a tear fell until it formed an uneven circle on the bottom of the page. All this time, her family legacy had been buried in this small metal box. A legacy her brother was trying to bury, just like this metal box had been.

Forgotten.

Until now.

It was as if her ancestors were reaching out to her. She had the power to make things right.

She looked at Mack, her eyes pleading for some kind of understanding. "Please," she begged in a hoarse whisper. "Don't take this from me."

His hand went to her cheek, wiping the tears that hadn't stopped falling. "I'm sorry."

Two words. They retched her heart, filling her with a heaviness that weighed her down. "Please. You don't understand."

Mack sat quietly by her side, his presence felt and yet he didn't disturb her as she turned each page, the need to take in every word her great-grandmother wrote down. Jennie wasn't going to leave here without knowing what the woman wrote about. Mack would not take this from her. Not now, not ever. There had to be a way to convince him the book was too important to destroy.

But not right now. Now, she was lost in the pages of her great-grandmother's words.

They call me Wichiwi, or dancer. It feels odd but I'm getting used to their ways. I want to go home and yet the Chief's son has taken a liking to me. I'm protected as long as he pays attention and doesn't cast me out..

Jennie smiled through tears as she flipped from one page to another.

The Chief's son has taken me as his wife. I don't mind. Not any more. He cares for me, allows me to care for him. My parents had wanted me to

marry Broderick Chance but if I had, I'd have been treated worse than this, I'm certain because he was a cruel, heartless man with eyes of evil. My Sioux husband is not cruel, not to me.

I have to say I believe I am in love with Yuma Ahote, my restless warrior. His birth name means Chief's son and restless one. He is tall and brave and handsome. I miss him when he is away and we dance under the stars when he comes back from the hunts. Right now we communicate with our eyes and bodies. We are slowly learning each others ways. I've taught him titbits of English. He knows how to say please and your welcome.

The tears continued to fall. Jennie didn't want to stop reading.

Mack sighed. "Jennie, it's time to go."

She shook her head, closed the book and held it to her heart, her arms guarding the ragged book, protecting it from him, knowing he wanted to take it from her. "I won't give it up." She tried to stand up, ready to run away as fast as her feet would allow. Yet she knew there was no where to go where he wouldn't find her.

"You don't have to give it up."

"I can't let you - what did you say?"

"Jennie, look. Look in the tin box. Here."

She followed his gaze. Her eyes widened. Dropping back to her knees, she held her precious book with one hand, laying a hand over the contents still in the box.

She stared in shock, then looked from the box to Mack. A grin spread across his face.

"Is it possible to have two books?" she whispered, slowly understanding what this meant.

"I suppose. Let's take a look." He brushed his fingers over her hand, the warmth causing Jennie to flinch. Mack looked as if he was about to say something and then turned away to concentrate on the book. What was he going to say?

The book that was left in the tin box was a published version of her great-grandmother's diary. The edges were not worn like the original, the leather cover lighter than the one Jennie held. When Mack opened the page, the words were typewritten instead of handwritten.

"I'm in shock," Jennie said, running her fingers over the second

book. “How did this happen?”

“It looks as if someone had her diary published. Someone cared enough to make a copy of it.”

“Perhaps she did.”

Mack flipped through the pages until his hands rested on some loose papers tucked inside. “This is what I’ve been looking for.”

“What is it?” she asked, confused more than ever.

“Railroad certificates. The Pinkerton Agency was hired to get these back. They are worth a small fortune to the railroad.”

“What about my brother? I’m confused. I thought he hired the Pinkertons to get the book back. That’s why you are here, no?”

“It is how we found out where the book was. The railroad had known all along the certificates were out here, hidden in this book. Abbott had obviously tried to bribe them, too. Your great-grandmother’s book had become quite famous but I’m afraid not for the reason you think. When your brother hired Mr. Pinkerton’s firm to locate the book, the agency put two and two together.”

Jennie shook her head. “How in the world did an outlaw like John Abbott get my great-grandmother’s books?”

Mack folded the certificates neatly and placed the lot in his breast pocket. “John Abbott was a crook. He was a master of all things evil. Wait, here is a letter.”

Mack unfolded the letter and handed it to Jennie. She began to read it out loud.

My dearest Mrs. Williams, or Wachiwi, as you’d rather be called. I am giving you this gift, this book of your diaries, typewritten by Joseph Merke of the Eagle Publishing House as our 2nd year anniversary gift. I know you still miss your Sioux husband and will always have a place in your heart for him. I’m sorry he died in battle, causing you to be relinquished back to our world. And yet, I’m not sorry because it led you to me. I am not jealous because I have a part of you that can still love someone else besides your Sioux husband.

I will never try to take that away from you but want you to have this published memoir to pass on to the children and our future grandchildren. Our legacy is only beginning, my darling wife.

While it has come to my attention that others have caused you pain because our first child is from your Sioux husband, little Ari will grow up to know me as his father and through this book of yours will learn of the legacy of his own natural father and heritage. I will never take that from him or you. Please accept this gift as my love for you is never ending.

Your loving husband, Francis

Jennie wasn't able to hold back the tears that began to flow. She felt Mack's arms around her now, holding her, his warm breath against her cheek as he rocked her back and forth whispering in his beautiful, raspy voice everything was alright. They were on their knees in a tiny shack, covered head to toe in dirt and dust and he was still here, holding her like he'd never let her go.

After she had been so cruel and pointed a gun at him.

There was no way he was able to hold her like this if he didn't care. She was trying to understand that he was doing his job, trying to recover the certificates and the book but the latter belonged to her family.

She sniffed. "You do understand my great-grandfather went out of his way to make sure this legacy survived. He even had a book made from her diary, those handwritten words lovingly put to paper." Jennie clutched the diary to her, trying to hold it so close.

Mack nodded. "I do. That's why I hope you understand one of these books must be destroyed. I made a promise. I have to keep my word."

His words were simple. Honest. He was Mack, a Pinkerton agent, a man filled with integrity for his fellow man and his work. Jennie knew if he didn't finish the job, if he looked the other way, his soul would not rest, he would become a broken man. He would become like the outlaws and badmen he was hired to capture. There was no in between for a man like Mack.

"May I see the book you hold in your hands?"

Mack hesitated. He gave a nod and held it out. She tucked the other diary under her arm and reached out for the published copy.

Mack turned to her. "One of them has to go. You decide which one. I'm sorry it has to be this way, Jennie, I am truly sorry."

She smiled to herself as page after page of the published book held

the same words her great-grandmother's diary had. With a deep sigh, she closed the book and turned it over to him. "This one. I want to keep the original."

"I figured. Let's get out of here."

On the way back, with the diary tucked close, Jennie didn't care if anyone saw her ride through town with Mack. Her body as well as her mind was utterly exhausted.

Of course, she should've known when Mack stopped in front of the boarding house, Miss Steele would be standing with her hands on her hips, mouth open wide at seeing the two of them together and yet Jennie didn't care anymore how things looked.

She was in no mood for any sass.

"This is where we must part," he told her.

Jennie looked up at Mack, who had stayed in the saddle. "You need a bath," she teased.

He laughed.

She grinned.

She closed her eyes for a moment, wishing deep in her heart he had cared for her more than the book. Yet, she was glad they had met. He was a man who was honorable and trustworthy, one her great-grandmother would approve of. Jennie opened her eyes and gave him a slight smile. "Thank you, Mack."

He nodded. "Thank you, darling Jennie." His words were low, soft enough for her ears only.

She swallowed, knowing he had to leave, wondering if they would ever meet again. "Goodbye, Mack."

As she turned away from the street, she heard the clip-clop of the mare's hooves fade away, heading towards the livery. She wasn't sure if he was coming back to the boarding house, since his things were still here.

She realized he had to take the book and certificates back to Chicago, to the Pinkerton office. He'd be gone for a long time.

It dawned on Jennie her brother would think their family secrets were now safe. She knew how to get a book published. There were plenty of them that would want to get their hands on this diary.

Except Jennie planned to keep the original safe. She was going to write her own version since the published book had gone with Mack. She'd write the words of her great-grandmother's life and submit it for publication. It may take years to accomplish but at least now her family legacy would never die.

"How dare you come in to town like a floozy! Why, I'm reporting this to the association!"

Jennie turned to Miss Steele. "You're just jealous that I was with a handsome, rugged man like Mack! Mind your own business and don't speak to me unless you have something nice to say!"

Miss Steele's eyes bulged from her head. "Why, I never!"

"Neither have I but you seem to think I am doing something awful. Why, I'll have you know I was on a treasure hunt. The story that will be written from this adventure will be published someday. You wait and see and I'm going to write how you tried to stop me!"

"Published? What! I've never stopped you from anything! Shall I add lying to your list of indecencies?"

"You can add whatever you want. Frankly, Miss Steele I just don't care."

"Humph! We will see how much you care after I speak with the town council."

At the moment, there was nothing sweeter than walking past Miss Steele, her great-grandmother's diary tucked in her arm.

Her dream had already come true.

Except for one thing.

Mack.

Her heart was breaking at the thought of him not being here every day.

How was she going to manage the incorrigible Miss Steele without Mack to distract her?

"Go ahead, ignore me! You shall see, Miss Williams! I am no one to trifle with! I'll be back here in six months to make sure you are following all the rules."

Jennie slammed the front door. She took her weary self upstairs, closing her door to the outside noise. There was dust and dirt all over

her and when she gazed in the mirror, she saw trails of dried tears down her face.

She stripped off her clothes, poured some water and washed up as best as she could in her circumstance. It felt good to wash off the dirt and grime, then threw a cotton shift over her head. Jennie got under the covers, placing the diary in her hand. She held it before tucking it under her pillow.

Lord, thank you for guiding me to this book. I will treasure it and treat is as a gift. Help me to keep my family legacy alive, and to soften my brother's heart that he may see through his evil ways. And Lord, if you see fit, let Mack find his way back here, to me. Amen. Also, please change the heart of that crazy lady outside still jabbering about how awful I am. You know me, Lord, I've done nothing wrong and yet she is determined that I fall from grace. Show your mercy and grace, Lord. Amen again.

Jennie waited to hear the soft sound of Mack's door close. When it was hours later and still no sound came from his room, she closed her eyes, her heart sad that he was already done. She thought maybe she'd see him in the morning. What had she wanted him to do, to reassure her he was going to return? After all, he got what he came here for. Why stick around?

Jennie closed her eyes, forcing herself to sleep and not think of Mack.

Chapter 10

*M*ack led the wagon, his sister and niece along side of him. The back was packed with so much stuff he wondered at first if they needed all of those things. Furniture, clothing in trunks, even groceries packed in between was stuffed in the overloaded wagon.

They had a few more hours to go until they reached Mill Ridge. When he had started out, they left Dallas thinking it would only take four hours to arrive in Wichita Falls. Then Marlene took a fit so they had stayed a day in town. Now they were headed to Mill Ridge. He wanted to get her settled so she would ease up and relax.

Mack figured a night there would be good for Marlene who was afraid to travel. She didn't like the outside, or talking to anyone. So every time they came upon someone along the trail, she began to cry. At one point she wailed, scaring off other travellers.

Charlotte, on the other hand, was adorable. He hadn't realized his five-year old niece was so grown up. It may have to do with her mother acting so much like a child. Every time Marlene got excited, Charlotte patted her arm, telling her mommy everything would be fine.

It was adorable and yet troubling. Now that Mack had officially retired, he wasn't sure how he would be able to help his sister. Her fears were not ordinary but he didn't think she deserved a lunatic asylum like the doctors in Dallas had said.

Perhaps staying in one place would give him the opportunity to find out exactly what was wrong.

"Are we soon there, Uncle Mack?"

Charlotte's tiny voice interrupted his thought. "Soon, Charlotte. It won't be long."

“I can’t wait, Uncle Mack. Thank you for buying us a new house.”

Mack ruffled her hair. She was such a kind little soul. “You are welcome. I can’t wait until we are there, too.” His body ached from the long wagon ride. He’d much rather be riding his mare instead of forcing her to pull this overloaded wagon. He bought her before he left town from Sam Smith at the livery. Figured if he was coming back, he may as well have a means of transportation.

He missed Jennie. Her smile, those blonde locks he was dying to run his fingers through. It had been a few weeks since he had gone riding out of town, anxious to get back to Chicago and finish what he had started.

Now that he had time to think about things, Mack realized it probably didn’t look good to her at the way he left town. Even his sister had said he was a fool. She didn’t speak much but when he told her about Jennie and the story about the book, she rolled her eyes and in a small, hoarse whisper, said, *You fool*!

Which made him realize there was hope for Marlene. He just had to find the right way to get her to come out of the prison she put herself in. She understood everything but refused to speak except for her wailing when it got too loud.

Charlotte had a way of keeping her mother calm. Mack hoped he was doing the right thing. Or, was he being selfish, wanting to get back to Mill Ridge to see Jennie? He had bought the house from Cravell, knowing he was going to come back come hell or high water. But had he really thought things through? What if Jennie didn’t want him?

Would he be able to live here, day after day, knowing Jennie was a breath away if she didn’t want anything to do with him? He had left town that night right after getting the book as if that was all he had ever wanted.

He had never promised her any future, or mentioned the fact how he truly felt. Mack had been driven to finish his task, get the job done and return but she may have taken it the wrong way. When his own sister told him so, he knew he had a hard row to hoe.

When they arrived at their new house, Mack stopped the wagon as

Charlotte bounced in her seat. “We are home,” he told her, taking her hand, helping her down. “Let’s get your mother settled inside first.”

Charlotte seemed to understand his meaning. Before the townsfolk spoke to her, Mack planned to get his sister out of the way, introduce her slowly so she wasn’t frightened of others at first.

His niece took her mother’s hand, walking along side Mack as they made their way to the house with a wide front porch. The last tenants had left a rocker behind. The nice big porch would be a good place for Marlene to sit and watch and to learn to adjust to her new surroundings.

After getting the two settled in, he brought in the multitude of belongings from the wagon. The sheriff left his office to come over and help since he was able to see the house from his big window. “Good to have you back, Mack. Ever think about being deputized?”

Mack was surprised to hear Nightingale would even consider him to work as a deputy. “I’m not sure. I suppose sooner or later I’ll have to find some work to do.”

Salem pulled out two large carpetbags. He hefted them onto his shoulders. “You think about it, would be glad to have you on-board.”

They worked together until the wagon was empty. Mack was hesitant to leave his sister alone for the first time but he needed to get the wagon and horse to the livery. She had worked hard getting them to Mill Ridge and deserved a break.

Mack had to explain to the sheriff how his sister’s health gave him concern. “Don’t you worry. Go on to the livery. I’ll be right out on my porch, keeping an eye out. We won’t let Miss Marlene or Miss Charlotte get lost.”

“Appreciate the help,” Mack told him, taking to the bench seat.

“By the way, the town appreciates the donation from the Pinkerton Agency. The money will help ease a lot of hearts that were ruined by that son-of-a-gun.”

“Heard you helped bring him down, Sheriff. That true?”

Nightingale tipped his hat. “Doesn’t matter. All that matters is he’s gone.”

“Amen to that.” Mack clenched his jaw. He turned back one time to

make sure his sister was still inside. The sheriff waved him on. It would take awhile until he learned to trust others.

He glanced at the school as he went by, wondering how Jennie was doing. He wanted to find her, take her in his arms but he knew better. With his abrupt leaving, no telling how she would handle seeing him again. One thing at a time, he supposed, turning the corner.

One thing at a time.

< > < >

Jennie heard Mack was back in town. It had been two days and she was disappointed he never took the time to stop in to see her. She sighed. Now she at least knew he had never really wanted her. No, it was the book, the certificates and the fame of being the Pinkerton to unravel the mystery that had mattered to him the most.

How does one get over a broken heart?

At least she had her schoolroom filled with children. It kept her busy during the day, but the nights, they were so long.

She stood outside on the platform waiting for the last of the children. “Bess, hello. Where are your brothers?” The three had always attended together.

Bess looked sad. “They had to go to work with Father. He said to tell you it is for a week, that’s all and they will be back next Monday.”

“Thank you, Bess. Go on inside. I’ll be in shortly.” As she turned to follow, a small child, adorned in a frilly dress and patent shoes was walking across the empty lot with a man Jennie would never, ever forget.

When they got closer, she sucked in her breath. Mack looked even more handsome, especially holding the child’s hand. He had a softened look to his rugged face.

She was afraid to look in his eyes. Instead, she got down to the child’s level. “Hello, I am Miss Jennie.” It was what the children had decided to call her. Ever since one of the younger children began to call her Miss Jennie, everyone else picked it up. She didn’t mind one bit, actually, she loved her new name.

The young girl, no more than five or six, held out her hand, even though her other one was squeezing Macks. “My name is Charlotte. Charlotte Everett. My mommy is sick and Uncle Mack is taking care of us. Are you the lady he falled in love with.”

Jennie didn’t know what to say. *The lady he fell in love with!*

Mack cleared this throat. “Now, Charlotte, don’t repeat things like that. Your Uncle Mack can speak for himself.”

Charlotte looked up at Mack with pure adoration. “It’s okay. My mommy said we can tell the teacher you love her. This much!” She let go of his hand and made both her arms into big circles.

Mack let out a deep sigh. “Your mother is starting to talk alot. Which is good for her but not so sure for me. Go on inside, Charlotte. Have a good day.”

“Bye, Uncle Mack.” Charlotte curtsied, making Jennie smile. The little girl didn’t have any problem introducing herself to the other students who were saying hello and giggling at something Charlotte said.

Jennie was still squatted down as if Charlotte was still standing in front of her. She had been too shocked to move. *Mack loved her! He even told his sister and his niece!*

A large hand whipped out in one steady movement. Jennie stared at it for the longest time, afraid. Then she took in a deep breath and took his hand. He pulled her upright so she was facing him. Jennie closed her eyes first, afraid to open them. She had dreamed of this moment for so many nights, wondering, waiting to see if he came back.

He didn’t let her down.

This man of loyalty, honor and honesty.

His dark eyes stared into hers when she lifted them to his. Mack drew her to him, taking her hands, pulling them to his chest. He kissed the knuckles on her hands, each one, until she was weak in the knees. “Stop,” she whispered. “No, don’t stop,” she said, giggling in spite of herself.

“I’m sorry I left like I did. I was in a hurry to finish my business so I could come back to you.” Mack touched her cheek.

“I realize that’s what happened but it hurt. I truly believed you wanted the book more than me. Yet, in my heart I know the kind of man you are.”

“I love you,” he told her.

“I know you do,” she said back.

“If you know then what’s the problem?”

Jennie smiled at his brash words. He was straight to the point, the kind of man who didn’t mix words. “I didn’t know, not until Charlotte told on you. When she said those words, I knew it was true. I love you, Mack. So much.”

She snaked her arms around his neck, pulling him forward. She didn’t care who was watching them. She wanted to feel Macks mouth on hers. She had missed him so much.

He dipped down and kissed her, his gentle movement making her sigh in his mouth. He pulled her closer, as if they could get any closer on the porch, in front of God and the whole town of Mill Ridge.

A clanging noise went off close by it made her jump. One of the children had snuck out and rang the bell. Miss Jennie pulled out of his arms. There, in the doorway, all of her students had their heads poking out, big smiles on their faces.

She swung back just as the sheriff stepped onto his porch, staring at all the commotion. When he recognized the two of them, he went back inside, waving his arm. A guttural laugh emerged from Mack. He shook his head, a smile so wide Jennie joined him.

“I wasn’t expected your return to be so dramatic.”

Charlotte began to jump up and down. “Look! Over there!” Just as the kids pushed their way outside, Jennie turned to see Clarissa slowly making her way down the street, a red scarf over her head. The children were giddy with laughter.

Mack placed an arm over her shoulder. “Guess I may have to go out there and send Clarissa home,” he told her.

“Oh?”

He nodded. “Rumor has it there may be a need for a deputy in town.”

Jennie turned to him in surprise. “After all your work as a

Pinkerton, you would take a position as a deputy?"

He took her cheeks in his hands and placed a small kiss on her nose. "I would do anything to show you how much I cared. Even take the job as a lowly deputy." He was kidding of course and they both knew it. Being a deputy was no easy job. Not even in Mill Ridge.

Clarissa stopped in her tracks. Their had been some noise from the children but when everyone gasped, Jennie and Mack turned away from each other to see what was going on.

"I'll be -," Mack mumbled.

Jennie placed a finger over his mouth and gave him a hug. "It's written in the stars, my love. We are meant to be."

Macks sister, Marlene, stood beside Clarissa, winding the scarf around the cow's neck, singing a low lullaby to her. Clarissa's ears flickered, listening, the sound calming her.

As the song continued, Clarissa's owner stepped up to place a rope around Clarissa's neck. Marlene gazed at the man, not shying away as she normally would when someone got so close.

Mack turned to her, drawing her away from the scene. "I love you Jennie. Will you marry me?"

She gave him a hug, wrapping her arms around his neck. "Yes, Mack, I'll marry you."

The children began to clap, jump and shout. Jennie shrugged and gave him the kiss of a lifetime. He hugged her close, almost as if afraid to let her go.

She looked up at the clouds, their depth so white and pure as the puffs moved across the sky in slow motion against the blue sky. If it hadn't been for the book, she never would've met Mack.

Thank you, great-grandmother. This gift of love you have honored me with will be cherished and honored with the publication of your story. The Williams Legacy will never be silenced.

Love, your great-grand daughter.

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I hope you enjoyed Mack and Jennie's story. What happens to

Marlene, Mack’s sister? Do you think she’ll ever find true love?

She, was brought to Mill Ridge for sanctuary from her troubled past. She didn't expect to fall in love ever again. Not after what had happened. Can one man bring her back from the brink of insanity?

Jack Fergenson needed the sanctuary of a small frontier town. A secret from his past had caused the demise of someone close. Falling in love can't be helped but dare he love again? Is he willing to take the chance?

Keep reading for Marlene’s story

A Sister's Sanctuary

Book #6

Chapter 1

*M*arlene heard a soft moo as the heavy-set, golden-brown cow made its way up the street at the exact same time two men turned to watch the action. She leaned front on the rocker, curious to what they were saying. “Fergenson’s cow is loose again. Looks like Elda forgot it was Monday. Clarissa has laundry hanging on her head,” the first man said.

The other fellow chuckled as they passed by Marlene’s front porch. “Yep, she ought to know better. Every darn Monday and Thursday that cow has a hankerin’ to take a long walk. She trudges right through Elda’s laundry lines. Not even Fergenson can persuade her to go back home.”

The man who spoke first shook his head. “Don’t see what it matters any. Elda will be along any moment now, her loud obnoxious voice calling for the sheriff. I pay it no mind, after all, the cows minding its own business.”

Marlene watched with amusement as the cow waddled its way down the middle of the street, a moo here and there. She stared at the bright yellow material wrapped around its brown neck.

“You bring back my curtain! Get back here you rotten thief!”

“I told you! Here she comes. The old batalak knows what days Clarissa takes her walk. Why does she bother doing

laundry on those days?"

"Beats me. We best get to the store."

As the two men turned their backs and walked further down the street, Marlene stood when the cow looked her way. Her first instinct was to go inside and mind her own business. Otherwise, it may lead to trouble she didn't want. Marlene didn't like to draw attention to herself. Ever again. She'd rather hide on this porch forever if it kept her away from the real world. She shuddered at the old memories.

Several townsfolk tried to persuade Clarissa to turn around to no avail. The more Marlene watched, she noticed the animal's irritation when someone took hold of the leather strap around her neck where a loud, annoying bell hung. A clattering noise made her cringe every time the poor thing moved. Why did its owner have to use such a noisy contraption around her neck? It must drive Clarissa crazy. Why did the cow keep her eyes on Marlene? Almost as if the cow was begging her to help. She had that lonely, haunted look in her eye. The one Marlene knew so well. That's when she knew she had to do something.

She looked around to see if anyone came to claim the cow who was now stiffening up, refusing to turn around and go back to its home. Marlene didn't like stepping off her porch, it was a safe haven, but someone had to do something before the cow went temporarily crazy, another place she knew all too well.

Taking in a few short breaths, Marlene forced one foot after another, moving slowly until she was about ten feet away. She stood and looked into the cows eyes, trying to channel the fear she saw there. For some reason the cow was drawn to her. Why? she wondered. She was the most unstable person in Mill

Ridge.

The only thing she knew to give herself relief when she became stressed was to focus on her voice. The one thing no one ever was able to take from her. At first, so she didn't scare Clarissa, she began to hum, softly, then a bit louder. The clanging of the bell stopped. She sang out, her voice like a songbirds, taking a step closer so she didn't intimidate Clarissa, who was stressed enough. She hoped and prayed the song would calm her. Marlene knew what is was like to be standing all alone amongst a town full of people and no one was able to help.

Clarissa moved towards her voice. With each syllable, Marlene took a tiny step as the cow slowly came forward. Some folks who were making their way down the street stopped to listen and watch. Marlene knew she had an audience. The hair on her arms stood straight up. Yet, she had to stay focused and not let anything get to her. The cow was more important than people. She had to keep that in her head and concentrate on the animal. She couldn't bear to see the lost, pained look in the cow's eyes any longer. If Marlene had the power to change the animal's circumstances, she would do whatever it took, even if she had to be in the midst of others to do so.

It was a life-changing moment as she reached out to unbuckle the leather strap from the cow's neck. As long as she kept her voice calm and steady, the slow ballad kept Clarissa calm. She petted her head first, rubbing her hands behind the cow's ears. After a few strokes, she reached towards the buckle again, unhitching it. The heaviness astounded Marlene.

The moment the buckle opened, it slid from her neck and began to topple to the ground. Marlene was worried as she

reached out to catch it the movement would cause Clarissa to panic. Before the leather hit the ground, a large hand caught it before it fell.

Marlene looked up to see a tall man crouching down, the leather belt in his hand. Strong, muscular arms bulged from the end of a rolled up cotton shirt. She gazed at the man in surprise and caught hazel eyes staring at her. It gave her a jolt. Her throat went dry. He was too close.

When he spoke, his voice was gravely yet kind. “No one has ever gotten so close to her before.”

Marlene found her voice. Although she hadn’t spoken to anyone in five long years except for her daughter and her brother, she found herself answering him. “Are you the owner?”

He nodded, his eyes still on her. Sweat trickled down her brow but she was frozen, lost in his eyes, unable to lift her fingers to swipe it away. He leaned closer, lifting one hand to wipe the sweat before it fell in her eye. She jerked back, almost stumbling away, a gasp stuck in the deep part of her throat.

Why in the world did she think she’d be able to ever have a conversation with anyone? Especially a man! Swallowing the gut-wrenching scream that tried to come to the surface, she turned and focused on Clarissa, reminding herself to take it one breath at a time. The cow would have to be her saving grace.

Marlene began to hum, softly again, turning away from Clarissa and taking a few steps down the street. There were a few gasps from the onlookers as the cow followed. She felt the animal behind her, even without the loud bell to announce where she was. Whoever placed the bell there hadn’t wanted

her to get lost. In the end, it had caused more pain for the poor thing than anyone realized.

The owner followed from a few yards away. “She didn’t like the bell, did she?”

Marlene shook her head, singing louder, hoping the man would not ask her anything that required more than a shake or a nod.

“She likes you. First time she’s taken an interest in anyone. You saved her. She wouldn’t let me near her except to milk her twice a day. When I tried to take that blasted bell off, she’d back away so fast I didn’t want to get her upset.”

She stopped singing for a moment, not understanding his reasoning at all. Anger drew her to speak at last. “Sir, for someone not wanting to upset a cow, you left that bell on to torture her day after day. Clearly, she is much happier without it around her neck.” She sped up, singing louder, hopefully to drown out his voice.

The man sighed. He walked faster to catch up. It didn’t make sense. One time being uncomfortable while he removed the heavy strap was much better than day after day of endless torture with that bell around her neck, swinging back and forth, causing her to leave her own yard to get away from the noise.

She knew too well how hard it was to get away from the nightmares that haunted her mind.

“She was treated badly. I was afraid to traumatize her.”

Marlene stopped. Clarissa stopped on cue. “How so?”

“It was the first day I rode from Wichita Falls to my new home here. Along the trail, a farmer was trying to force her to follow the other three cows. He beat her relentlessly with a whip. I stopped and asked him how long she had the bell

around her neck. He had just placed it there. The other three cows didn't mind so much but she was terrified."

A plethora of memories came back to haunt Marlene.

"What did you do?"

"It pained me to see her being mistreated and figured it wouldn't get any better. She was not going to do well. I didn't expect her to stay alive with that strap going to her backside like it was. I offered to buy her. Told the farmer she'd never measure up." He pointed to a rather large two-story white clap-board house at the end of the street. It sat on a corner lot with a white-washed waist-high fence. The gate was wide open, probably the place Clarissa escaped from. "There's my place."

Marlene choked back the sobs that caught at her throat, reliving memories that had been stashed away for the last few years. She wanted to go back inside her house, the place her brother bought for her and Charlotte to live out their lives. Away from staring eyes. Her safe haven.

He was a hero in her eyes for saving the cow. Yet, it was the trigger that was sending her mind back to where she never wanted to go again. "I have to go," she mumbled, hurrying through the gate so Clarissa followed her. When the cow was inside the yard, she dashed out, waved and ran up the street, away from those hazel eyes, his soft voice and those muscular arms that she wanted to hate but wasn't able to. He hadn't done anything wrong.

He seemed like a normal, upstanding man. Rescuing a cow because its owner was cruel and heartless. Looking at her, not with pity but with a strange curiosity she wasn't able to define. Yet, looks can be deceiving. She knew that better than anyone.

Marlene ignored the other townsfolk as they shouted out to her. The lady they called Elva held the yellow curtain to her bosom while Marlene walked by. She wanted to get inside before anyone else came along. She lifted her skirts and hurried up the street, moving one leg after the other, panting in small spurts as she tried to walk but wanted to run. She looked around to see strange faces smiling at her, some she recognized in passing. She lowered her head, taking care to watch her step as she got closer to home.

Her brother was coming around the corner from the school where he had gone to see Miss Jennie, the schoolmarm. When he noticed how she was trying frantically to get home, he frowned and came towards her, his arms opening wide to protect his sister. He knew she didn't leave the porch much. Mack was the only one who knew what had happened to her.

"That crazy one there!" She heard someone shout out. "The darn cow followed her like nobody's business!"

"She's not crazy! Shut your mouth if you know what's good for you!" Her brother's deep voice warned.

The man in question nodded and called out. "Sorry, Mack! Didn't see you there!"

"Don't tell me, tell her, but not right now." Mack put his protective arms around her, shielding her from any more remarks and helped her inside. He held her for a few minutes, until her heart rate went down.

When she took in a deep breath, he released her. "You okay now, kid?"

She smiled. "I'm not a kid. I'm two years younger than you and you're no kid, either."

He pulled her in for another big brotherly hug. "I'm so glad to hear you talking, Marlene. It about killed me when you

stopped."

"I don't talk to anyone else except you and Charlotte. The two of you are the only ones deserving of any conversation." She thought for a moment. "And maybe that man who owns the cow."

Her brother frowned. "Fergenson? What were you talking to him for?"

She twisted her fingers together. "I don't know. He saved Clarissa from a horrible life. Besides, I didn't say more than a few words to him."

Her brother tilted his head and watched her. She didn't like to be scrutinized, especially by Mack. He was a retired Pinkerton agent and was able to read people like nobody's business. She had learned not to show much emotion if she didn't want him to learn anything, even though he usually always figured things out. She wasn't able to hide much from her protective brother.

"Is that a fact?" Mack asked, watching her carefully.

She turned away. "Stop now, Mack. It was an innocent encounter. Clarissa didn't like that bell around her neck."

"I heard you singing. Miss Jennie and I heard it from the stoop at the school house. Charlotte heard it first."

She shrugged like it was no big deal. "I was trying to help Clarissa. No matter what, music is universal. She understood."

"I'm glad you were able to go help someone that needed you. It's a first step, Marlene. You're going to get better. Sooner or later, you'll begin to let people in. Time is all you need."

Marlene shivered. "I don't know, Mack. It's been five years since, well, it's been a long time. I guess I didn't handle things too well."

He frowned again. “You are holding something inside, sis. Something you won’t even tell me. Sooner or later, it’ll eat you alive if you don’t let it out.”

Marlene turned away. He was right. No matter what, she’d never tell. Then it wouldn’t be real. The horror of that day was a secret she had kept for so long, no one was ever going to get it out of her. No one. It had almost sent her over the edge. To the point where loud noise made her crazy. She had remembered how Mack came to her rescue, trying to put her on a train to Chicago, to take her and Charlotte home with him.

As if she were reliving the moment, she pictured the train and how the people around her sounded so loud, as if they were sitting there, staring at her, screaming at the tops of their lungs. When in fact they were talking amongst themselves. It had been too much too soon and Marlene realized it hadn’t been the people around her screaming. It had been her screaming at the top of her lungs. Mack had taken her off the train right away before they hauled her away to the insane asylum.

She owed him so much. He was her sanity when she thought she had lost her mind. He found a nice place for her and Charlotte to stay. The couple took good care of them but she was glad when Mack came and brought them here. This town was different than the big city. It was smaller and the people were not as noisy.

She began to shake.

“Take in deep breaths, Marlene.” Her brother knew when she was reliving her past. He was a godsend. She listened to his voice as he breathed with her. She settled down then as exhaustion came over her.

“I need to rest.”

Mack helped her to the settee, where he covered her with a blanket. “I’ll pick up Charlotte from school, don’t you worry. You rest.”

Marlene nodded. She was tired. Mack wanted to pick up her baby girl because his love, Jennie, was the school teacher. She was certain Mack wanted to see her again. Besides, she was so tired from all the emotions that played through her head.

She kept seeing Mr. Furgenson’s muscular arm as it caught the leather strap and bell before it tumbled to the ground. She saw hazel eyes, curious and engaging as she drifted off to sleep.

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Jack swatted the cow on the behind, talking to her like she was a ten year old child. “Now, Clarissa, you’re going to have to behave. There will be no more opening that gate and running off, you hear me?”

“I am sure she does.”

Fergenson turned to see the sheriff at the gate. “Well, she needs to be told something. What can I do for you, Sheriff Nightingale?”

He tipped his hat, slid the bolt on the gate open and came through. “Folks keep asking me what it is you do for a living, son. I don’t see you going to work each day like the rest of the folks here. I can hardly believe that milk cow gives off enough milk to earn a living from, even though I see you taking the extra to the mercantile each day.”

Jack shook his head. Here we go again. “Ain’t nobody’s business what I do for a living. How do you or anyone else know how much milk this old girl produces? Maybe it’s

enough for me to live off of."

The sheriff chuckled. "Hardly. I understand you bought the place from the family by proxy when the old man who owned this place died. It's a pretty big space for one person. People have a right to know when someone is being secretive. Especially when you don't come out of that house except to chase Clarissa or bring milk to the store. In Mill Ridge we all have secrets, son. Except we have to know if those secrets will bring trouble."

"No trouble here, sheriff. I can promise you."

The sheriff eyed him carefully. "I'm going to take your word for now. My gut says you're an upstanding citizen. If I'm proved wrong there's going to be a whirlwind of s-"

"There won't be, I promise you that. My word is honorable."

The sheriff tipped his hat and went back through the white-washed gate. A trickle of sweat shot down the side of Jack's neck. He didn't want anyone finding out what he did for a living. If they knew, he'd either be the laughing stock or everyone would be at his door, never leaving him alone.

Nope, it was best no one ever found out.

Chapter 2

*J*ack walked by Marlene's house several times but she wasn't sitting on the front porch. He hadn't seen the site of her in days. It was almost as if she vanished from the face of the earth. He had to pass by on the way to the mercantile. For the past three days, he had milked Clarissa more than her usual twice a day milking. For some reason, he got an extra one from her.

Clarissa didn't seem to mind though. She chewed on her curd, swatting at flies and enjoying her enclosed space in the back of Jack's yard, which now had a lean-to in the corner to protect her from the elements. She was like a different cow since she got that dang bell off. It was a godsend for Jack, too. He had listened to that blasted bell ringing and clattering all over his yard since he rescued her. Now, it was eerily silent. At least he was able to get his daily work done without the noise.

Walking by Marlene's place one last time, he wondered why she seemed so scared. Her eyes were hauntingly beautiful. But there was history there, as if something terrible had happened. He slowed down as he walked by, wondering when she was going to come back out on the porch.

He had noticed her before. When Mack brought her and the little girl to that house, he had been walking by on his way to the mercantile. She was beautiful in his eyes. Everyone said

she had crazy written all over her. Jack didn't believe she was crazy. No. Not with a voice like she had. It was mesmerizing. If it made a cow follow her then there was something beautiful about her. Something special. He wanted to get to know her more. If it were possible.

Disappointment flowed through him when he didn't see her again on his way home. He wondered if she had been a figment of his imagination. Jack shook himself and took longer strides. He needed to get back to work, it was waiting for him.

When he was on the last leg of his walk, a voice so recognizably beautiful made him stop in his tracks. Then he saw her standing at the fence, running her hand along the back of Clarissa's neck while singing to her in that regal voice.

He was unable to move. Even Clarissa stayed still while she sang, except for an occasional swat of the tail. Marlene wore a long cloak with a hood to hide herself. Yet, he knew it was her without seeing her face. There was no way to hide a voice that opened up the heavens like hers did.

When the song was over, she gave Clarissa one last pat. "I must go, sunshine. I'll be back tomorrow." Before she turned, Jack stepped back from the street. She had come here after seeing him go by her house, which made him realize she thought it was safe to come here without him being around. Instead of confronting her, Jack slipped down an alley that ran in between two houses, taking the long way around the block. He wanted her to come back, to sing to his cow and he wanted her to feel safe and wasn't sure why. If Clarissa made her feel safe, he'd stay out of the way. He didn't want to scare her away.

Frustration loomed the rest of the afternoon. Jack tried to

sit at his desk and get some work done but every time he tried to put pen to paper, his thoughts fogged up with the image of Marlene, standing outside his home, her beautiful voice serenading his cow. His work had to go out in Friday's post. If it didn't, he didn't get paid. A simple condition of his work he never had trouble meeting before now. The others had warned him about this happening, yet he had always laughed at his associates since it had never happened to him before.

He was wrong for laughing at them. Jack stood, stretched and gazed out the window, trying to get some fresh ideas. Mill Ridge was not as busy as Wichita Falls, where he came in on the train a few months back. He had wanted a more remote place, far away from the big city he had grown up in. This was perfect, even if the town was starting to grow.

He knew Miss Addie was sending mail order brides left and right, causing a plethora of families to sprout up all around. Down the road a few years from now, this town was more than likely to have the rail road tracks passing right by. There'd be more people here, just what he didn't want.

For now, this was the perfect place. It was relatively quiet, especially now that he had that bell off Clarissa's neck, thanks to Marlene. He thought he'd have no trouble working.

Marlene took the place of the distracting bell. All he seemed to be able to do was think of her. He had to get it out of his system, one way or another and get back to work. Walking by her house on purpose or waiting for her to appear was silly. Tomorrow when she showed up to visit with Clarissa, he'd hurry back and speak to her, crossing his fingers she didn't run off.

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Marlene made a delicious roast with potatoes and an apple pie for dessert. She had spent the latter part of the day cooking after she had been to see Clarissa in the morning. It made her spirit rise up when she sang for the animal. To watch its ears perk up meant the world to Marlene. She was giving back and it made her feel elated. Yet, she knew sooner or later the folks here would make fun of her, whispering behind their bonnets and hands how crazy she was. There were a few who already had said those words.

She had heard it in Dallas, too, how the crazy lady with the child got riled up and screamed at the top of her lungs. From the one incident on the train, she was unable to live down that horrible day. After that, she didn't go outside unless she was hidden from the world under her cloak and hood. Even on the days when it was too hot to wear the coat, she didn't care. If she wasn't able to see others, then she figured they weren't able to see her. Maybe that idea rendered her crazy after all.

At least they had the common courtesy not to make fun or say any slandering remarks when Charlotte was along. With her little blonde curls and delightful smile, everyone fell in love quickly. Charlotte had saved Marlene's life.

Just as she had saved her daughters. Marlene almost stumbled at the thought. She placed a bowl of potatoes on the dining room table, wiping her hands before sitting down. Charlotte looked up at her with a sweet smile. "I'm so hungry my tummy is screaming inside," she told her mother.

Marlene sat across from her at the wooden table. She pressed her hands together in prayer. Charlotte followed suit. "May I say prayers?" she asked, her little eyes dancing with delight.

Marlene nodded.

“Dear God and Jesus, thank you for the food I’m going to eat. My tummy thanks you, too. Oh, and thank you for the big piece of meat and all the other stuff inside the pan. Some of it doesn’t look good but I’ll try to clean it off my plate. And if I don’t, can you tell mommie so she doesn’t worry about me eating my vegetables. I love you, God. And all God’s children say,” she finished, looking at her mother for help.

They both said in unison, “Amen!”

They placed their napkins on their laps and dug in. It was the two of them tonight since Mack was taking Miss Jennie for dinner at the café and a long walk afterwards. Marlene wondered how long it would be until the two tied the knot. Would she still be welcome here? Her brother had promised her she’d always have this home to live in. He meant well, but he had fallen in love now. Things can change so rapidly.

Marlene leaned over to give her daughter a hug. “I’m so glad you are in my life, Charlotte.”

“Will you read me a story tonight, Ma? The one about the little girl who was lost in the woods?”

“Of course, dear. After you wash up, we’ll get you ready for bed. Would you like to help me with some of the dishes tonight?”

She began to jump up and down, clapping her hands. Marlene tried to give her a stern look but burst out laughing instead. Then she began to bounce up and down until they were laughing so hard Marlene almost fell off the chair.

After her bath and story, Charlotte fell right to sleep. Marlene was restless, so she stewed herself a cup of tea and sat on the porch. It was nice sitting on the rocker, half-hidden behind a large plant she had arranged on a table and a few pots with leafy plants she placed outside. Her brother had

nailed a piece of wood from one end of the porch to the other so she was able to set her pots there. She loved flowers. The smell made her calm and looking at them grow made her happy. It also formed a type of wall to the outside world.

She was able to sit out on the porch squeezed between her plants on a wooden bench, without being noticed too much. She knew some of the townsfolk saw her there. They had waved a time or two but mostly everyone let her alone. As long as she didn't talk, they would pass her by with a nod or wave. It was what she preferred.

A lone figure walked down the street towards her porch. It was Mr. Fergenson. Before she realized, she called out. "Hello."

He slowed his pace and gave her a smile. "Why, hello. Is that you, Miss Singleton?"

"It's Miss Everett-Singleton, but you can call me Marlene."

"I will, Marlene. I can't see you but I can hear you. It's almost dark, where are you hiding?" He stood at the front porch trying to peer in. Where he stood all he was able to see was the rows of plants on the thick board Mack had put up. It was almost fun to watch him struggling, trying to find her.

"I'm here."

"Why don't you come out? Then we can talk."

Did she want to talk to him? Obviously, since she was the one speaking out in the first place. Marlene wasn't even sure why she did that. It came out of her mouth like a fly buzzes past your ear. She had to make boundaries first before they talked. "I like my privacy."

He leaned an elbow on the railing. "I can see you do. Interesting. Well, then, we can speak like this. I don't mind."

She was surprised he didn't push the issue. "You don't

mind?"

"Not at all. I understand wanting to be alone."

"I've noticed that, Mr. Fergenson. You have a big house all by yourself. It seems odd to live in such a huge house."

"Maybe I intend to have a family someday."

Marlene leaned forward, giving away her hiding spot. "Interesting. How are you going to raise a family if you can't even keep a cow in the yard?"

"Well," he told her, grinning. "That's where you come in."

She stood, shocked at his words. "Me? What in the world do I have to do with anything?"

Was he serious?

"I plan to marry you, Marlene. You just don't know it yet."

"Mr. Fergenson, you are out of line."

He tipped his hat. "Then I best be on my way. My apologies and yet, I'm not sorry I told you. Would you like to take a walk tomorrow after supper?"

Fear cloaked over her like a dark cloud. "I can't possibly go for a walk with you."

He nodded. "Very well, then. Good day, Marlene."

"Good day."

He took a few steps and turned. "You can expect me to ask you every single day until you say yes. I won't stop asking."

When he turned and walked away, she heard the soft sound of his leather shoes shuffling on the ground.

Marlene felt a flush begin to rise up on her cheeks. She placed both hands over her face and closed her eyes. It had been five long years since a man took a real interest in her. She had avoided people all this time. Her husband, Mark, her sweet, darling husband who died so young, was all she'd ever known. She thought life was wonderful when he asked her to

marry him, providing them with a rustic, sturdy cabin on a few acres outside of Dallas. They were going to homestead, build a life together but then he left one afternoon and never returned. Her brother, a Pinkerton agent, came to tell her that her husband had drowned in the Brazos River.

She had remembered crying for two weeks straight, not knowing what to do next. Marlene was with child and she was going to tell Mark but never got the chance. For four months, she stayed by herself in that cabin. Her brother was always out on a job. His work took him away for long periods at a time and yet, in between jobs, he always stopped to check in on her. He warned her she should go to the city but she hadn't wanted to leave the home Mark had built for her.

She had gone into town one day for supplies. After buying a newspaper, decided to become a mail order bride. It made sense. It was time to take action. She had kept quiet about the baby, figuring she'd tell her husband-to-be when they met. She had been so naive.

"Marlene, what are you doing out here so late?"

Her brother came up on the porch, a smile as wide as the street itself across his face.

"I'm thinking."

Mack sat down on the small bench beside her. He was tall so he had to push a few of the leaves of the plants scattered here and there out of his way. "Want some company?"

"I always have time for you, Mack." He had been by her side and saved her from a fate worse than death. He still didn't know her darkest secret. It had haunted her dreams for all these years.

"I asked Jennie to marry me." He always got straight to the point.

Marlene gave him a hug. “I bet she said yes.”

He smiled and nodded. It was hard for him not to. “She said yes.”

“I’m so happy for you, Mack. You deserve to be happy.”

He set her back and stared into her eyes with brotherly concern. “So do you. I want you to know you and Charlotte are part of my family. You will live here always. Jennie already told me how she wants you to. She loves Charlotte, so I don’t see any issues with all of us in the same house. It’s spacious enough.”

Marlene let a tear fall. “I knew you were going to ask her, Mack. To be honest, I did worry somewhat.”

He returned her hug. “No need to worry. You already like Jennie. She is so busy with her school, I doubt she’ll have much time to cook and do all the domestic work that needs done here. I’d appreciate if you’d give her a hand.”

Marlene pinched his cheeks in a sisterly manner. “Mack, I know you too well. You don’t need me to help out. It’s your way of wanting to make sure I’m taken care of. After all, I did go a bit crazy for awhile.”

He shook his head. “Marlene, any woman who has been through what you have deserves to be taken care of. I wish I had been there that day,” he stumbled with his words.

Mack always got upset when he spoke about the day he found her, clothes torn and filthy from living in the woods for three weeks with a newborn child. She had lived on her instincts, keeping the child warm, shredding her skirts to wrap the child, eating berries and nuts she found. Even stealing supplies from a cabin that happened to be abandoned. She had spent a few nights there, curled up in the corner of the dusty place.

After getting some much needed sleep, Marlene had gone out scouring the area for food. She had worked her way around the near wooded areas, circling the cabin and when she came back around noticed a buck board had pulled up to the front door. The owner had come back.

Marlene left then, going deeper into the wooded area, building a small lean-to from twigs and leaves. It had worked for about five days until the rain began. Texas winds howled at night. Marlene was afraid the baby was getting sick. She had to go back to the real world. Scared and alone, she began to stumble around the woods, trying to find her way out. For a whole day she had wandered until she looked up and Mack was there, his horse galloping towards her and little Charlotte.

She hadn't remembered much after that, waking up a few days later, her child at her bosom. She was in the hospital in Dallas, Mack at her side, who looked as if he hadn't slept in days. She had told him everything, except for the secret she'd take to the grave.

Shaking her head, she realized Mack was waiting for her to comment. "You were there when I needed you, brother. I'll never, ever forget it. But, it's time you moved on from taking care of us and marry that lovely schoolmarm. You two are perfect for each other."

He smiled. "Yes, we are. Thanks, sis. Like I said, this is your home and always will be."

She smiled. "Perhaps I may marry too, again. Someday."

He looked at her in awe. "What did you say?"

"Mr. Fergenson, he told me he was going to marry me."

"Do I need to speak with him?" Mack's voice held a tint of anger.

"No, Mack. Settle down. He mentioned it in passing as he

walked by my porch. He wants me to take a walk with him tomorrow."

"That's it. I'm going to warn him now." Mack stood.

She followed suit and placed a hand on his arm. "Please, Mack. Don't be foolish. I like to be asked. Not that I'll go but it was nice to have a good person like him ask."

"I suppose it is. If he gets out of line, you tell me, Marlene and I'll put a stop to any advances."

She gave him a hug before going inside. "Don't worry. I can take care of Mr. Fergenson."

Mack grinned. "I suppose you can."

Chapter 3

*M*arlene stood at the gate, a hood over her hair like she wore the day before. Jack walked up to her this time instead of hiding in the alley. “Marlene,” he said softly so as not to scare her.

She looked startled for a moment that someone would know who she was in her disguise. There was a hitch in her voice then she realized it was Jack and turned back to Clarissa. The cow mooed again, as if Jack was interfering. It almost made him burst out in laughter.

When the song was over, she stood petting Clarissa. He was satisfied to stand beside her, saying nothing at all. When she finally did speak, he was surprised at her words.

“I’ll go with you on one condition.”

“Anything.”

“Anything? You don’t know what that condition is.” She grinned.

“Does it matter? As long as I have you by my side, I can’t go wrong.”

“You are a charmer, Mr. Fergenson.”

“Jack.”

“Jack, it is, then.”

“What is your condition?”

“My daughter, Charlotte. She likes to walk. I thought

perhaps we can walk her to the church social this evening. We'll be out in the open."

"The church social sounds fine. I'm not too fond of socializing but for you, I'll try anything."

"I'm not either, Jack. I don't care to be around people for long."

He nodded. "I understand. If you tell me you are ready to go, we'll leave immediately."

She pulled her hood closer before turning and walking quickly up the street. Some people turned to stare at her, a confused look on their faces. It was too warm outside for a coat like she was wearing.

Jack wondered how long it would take to convince her she was worth shedding that hooded cloak and walking down the street with her head held high.

He turned around, determined to do the right thing. Jack followed Marlene until she ran up on her porch and quickly went inside. He passed her house and headed towards the school, knowing her brother was there dropping off Charlotte. He had seen him every morning do so. He stood outside the school until Mack came out with a huge smile on his face. When he saw Jack, he sobered.

Mack came towards him. "Fergenson?"

"I come to ask you permission to take Marlene to the church social this evening."

He stared at Jack for more than a minute or so. "I suppose that's up to Marlene."

"She's the one who wants to go. She asked me."

Mack looked surprised. "That a fact? Well, maybe you are good for her. Know this, Jack. I'm watching you. Every move you make that concerns my sister, I'll be right there if you

mess up. She's been through too much. Walk softly."

Jack respected Mack. He held out his hand. "I appreciate you looking out for your sister. I plan to marry her, Mack. If she'll have me."

Mack gave it some thought and shook his hand. "You have your work cut out for you. Remember what I said."

Jack sighed when Mack gave him a slap on the shoulder and walked over to the sheriff's office. Word was Mack Everett was going to be the new deputy in town. He had heard the rumors the other day. Guess they weren't rumors after all. Mack walked in the door like he owned the place.

Jack looked at his watch, realizing he had a deadline to meet. He had a day and a half to finish his work and get it out in Friday's mail. Rubbing his palm on his chin, he hurried back to his house. The large two story home loomed over him as he made his way up the path to the front door. He hesitated before going inside. It sure did look like it needed something. What it needed was Marlene and Charlotte and perhaps a few more children.

He grinned. No one back in the city would believe he was ready to settle down. He'd been a loner most of his life, moving from city to city or wherever his job took him. Now, he had finally bought a place where he was able to work at his own pace, away from the hustle and bustle and bright lights.

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"Do you think I look pretty, mommie?" Charlotte stood in her pink dress and black patent leather shoes. It was one of the special dresses her uncle Mack bought for her when they first moved here.

Marlene twirled her around in a circle. "You look beautiful,

young lady. Like a princess." Charlotte's eyes widened and she giggled.

"Mommie, that's silly. Princesses have crowns."

"I can make one for you," Marlene offered, knowing Charlotte's next move would be to wrinkle her nose. And she did.

"My two favorite ladies look lovely this evening," Mack told them. Jennie was standing alongside of Mack, her arm through his.

"I swear if I hadn't met you already, Miss Charlotte, I'd swear you were the princess of Mill Ridge."

Charlotte giggled again, her cheeks pinkening at the compliment from Miss Jennie. She curtseyed and ran to the door when someone knocked. It had to be Jack. Knowing it was him, no one reprimanded her for opening the door.

"Well good evening, Miss Charlotte. You look like a princess," Jack told her out of the blue. Marlene smiled when she heard Charlotte giggling.

"We're all waiting for you! Hurry in so we can go." Charlotte took him by the hand and pulled him in to the others. "He's here! Can we go now?"

Marlene and Jack each held one of Charlotte's hands as they all made their way to the church social. She was awfully happy this evening. "I get to have a pretend daddy, don't I, mommie? Now the kids won't ask me where my daddy is."

She was about to explain that Jack wasn't her daddy when he placed a finger over his lip above the little girl's head.

She frowned, not wanting to give her daughter any false hopes. They'd been fine the last five years, the two of them. But when Jack looked into her eyes, she felt the fear slide away. Was she able to trust this man? She hardly knew him.

She took a hand to pull her cloak closer when she realized she had left the house without it. How did she manage now? There was no place to hide. As they walked on to the grass at the church, most of the townsfolk were there. Some mingled in small groups while others sat on benches holding a plate of food. Soft music played in the back ground. She looked up to see a man playing a fiddle, singing softly. It was very nice.

She felt exposed. Charlotte let go of her hand to run off with the other kids who were playing games in front of the church steps. Before she realized what happened next, Jack's soft hand encased hers in his own. She almost jumped two feet in the air.

Instead of letting go, he held on. "I didn't mean to frighten you." His words came out softly, against her ear as he spoke for her only.

Marlene sighed. She needed to get over this fear. It had its hand around her neck like a vice. "I get anxious in crowds. I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

He gazed into her eyes. Somehow, she didn't feel alone. It was as if he knew her fear. She took in a few deep breaths.

"Fear is not going to hurt you. Not ever again. I am here to keep fear away. I don't know what happened, Marlene, all I know is I don't want you to ever have to face things alone. Will you let me help you?"

His words floored her. She wanted to sink to the ground and cover her face with her hands but his words made her pull her shoulders back and her chin up. "I can do this. Jack, lead the way."

He tucked her arm in his and they moved forward. She realized with someone by her side, it wasn't as bad as she had imagined. There were even some folks who seemed pleasantly

surprised she made it to the social.

“We’re glad you are here,” Sophie Nightingale told her. She gave her a hug and moved on to the next person. The sheriff’s wife was mingling among all the guests.

Doc Hart and his wife Caroline shook hands with Jack, then turned to Marlene. “How are you feeling, Marlene?” Doc Hart asked.

What he meant was she able to handle being around all these people. When she first got here, Mack insisted she have a physical exam done. Then Doc Hart spent over an hour talking with her since Mack told him what had happened. He was understanding and kind. He told her how his wife had a serious problem with migraines and everyone in her home town thought she was a witch because it caused her to have epileptic seizures. He had wanted her to know she wasn’t alone, that everyone had problems. He didn’t make her feel like an outcast for being scared around people. “I’m doing fine so far, Doc.”

Her words sounded weak. She took a deep breath. This was challenging for sure. Then she realized Jack had a hold of her hand when he squeezed it lightly. He seemed to know when she needed his encouragement.

Doc Hart seemed pleasantly surprised when she talked. He hadn’t heard her speak before. “Good for you, Marlene.” He acknowledged Jack and moved along. Caroline squeezed her hand and gave her a wink.

“Would you like some dessert?” Jack asked, moving to a bench under one of the large trees. It was in sight of everyone and yet away from the center of the crowd, another kind gesture to keep her from getting too anxious.

“That would be lovely, thank you.” He understood her need

to go slowly. As he walked towards the tables filled with food, Marlene watched in amusement as Mack slapped him on the back and said something to him. He was probably warning Jack to behave. When Jack just nodded, she knew everything was going to be OK.

Charlotte played with the other kids until Marlene caught her eye and motioned for her. The little girl dragged her feet, knowing it was time to go. She kept looking back at the kids, waving whole-heartily.

Jack was sitting on the bench beside her, quiet. He had given her space to get accustomed to everything. She looked at him. “Thank you. It’s been a lovely evening.”

He stared at her, those hazel eyes penetrating so she wasn’t able to look away. “I’d like to see you again, Marlene.”

She shivered and wanted to tell him she wasn’t what he thought. Marlene had evil inside of her that no one was aware of. She had done a horrible thing. Not even her brother knew. No one did. If Jack got too close, he may find out about her nightmares that caused her to curl up in her bed, shivering not from the cold but from what she did.

Was Marlene willing to take the risk?

When Charlotte arrived, Jack picked her up and set her on his shoulders. She was so excited she yelled out to all her friends. “Look at me!” Her hands were moving back and forth, she was laughing and it made Marlene’s heart melt.

He held out his hand for Marlene. “Let me walk you home.” As they left the social, she was trying to decide if she’d accept his offer to meet again.

When Charlotte laughed so hard tears rolled down her cheeks at something Jack said, Marlene knew it was all worth it to hear her squeal with delight. It was worth every single,

dark secret to see her baby girl happy. For now, she'd see what happens and keep those horrible memories tucked deep, deep away where no one was allowed to go.

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"Did you hear what I said!"

Jack had been day dreaming as he stood in front of the postal counter. Jack stared at the skinny man.

"That'll be four dollars."

Jack thought it was an outrageous price to send mail to New York City but he didn't want to draw any attention. If anyone were to open the package by mistake, it would be the end of things for him, so he wasn't about to make a fuss. He wasn't ready yet. Maybe soon, but not yet. He threw some coins on the counter, added an extra for a tip and left without delay. He wanted to stop by and see if Marlene was up for a walk this evening.

When he got closer to her front porch, she was already outside, leaning over the railing and waving him down.

When he got there, he tipped his hat. "Well, it's a fine day now, isn't it, Marlene."

"It sure is. I wanted to tell you I was with Clarissa this morning and her one foot seemed to be hurting. She limped across the yard when I got there."

He didn't like the sound of things. "I'll have to have the doctor take a look at her."

Marlene looked worried. "She hasn't left the yard since we took off the silly bell. There must be something there causing the damage. Maybe we need to check. I can come with you."

"It will be a pleasure."

He held out his arm, feeling lucky to have her with him so

soon after the church social the other night. They made their way across the street and stopped to see Doc Hart. He was having dinner with his wife but when he heard the news of Clarissa, he promised to stop by within the hour.

They hurried towards Jack's house. He noticed Marlene wasn't wearing her cloak. Her hair was held back with silver pins along the side while the curls laid loose down her back. Jack almost stumbled when he realized he wasn't paying attention.

Marlene shook her head. "Jack, you are staring at me all the time. Can you please stop?"

"It's hard to. You are so beautiful."

She smiled and hurried ahead of him. "Now is not the time, Jack." Opening the gate, Clarissa began to step across the yard. Jack saw her right front leg had a slight limp.

"I can't believe I didn't take notice this morning." He had been in a hurry to get to the post office and never noticed Clarissa's state of affairs. Jack felt bad he had not paid attention. "I'm sorry, Clarissa." A hand began to rub her behind her ears while Marlene hummed a slow tune. Before long, Doc Hart came along with his medical bag.

After her exam, the doc nodded his head and placed Clarissa's hoof back on the ground. "It looks like she has some foot rot."

Marlene gasped. "What is that?"

"It comes from bacterium Fusiformis necrophorus or an infected foot. Lucky for you, Jack, you got it in the early stages. Good call."

Jack spoke up. "I have to admit I didn't notice. Marlene did."

Doc Hart nodded to her. "We'll clean it out and give her

some ointment every day for awhile and see what happens." He looked at the make-shift lean-to. "What kind of hay do you have in there, Jack?"

He shrugged. "I got it from the sheep farmer that came through. He had an abundance when he was hauling it through town."

"My advice is to get rid of all that hay and start over. It's probably where she got the foot rot. Sheep tend to spread the disease more than anything. Never, Jack, ever buy hay from a sheep farmer."

Lesson learned. Marlene stayed and helped Jack hold Clarissa while the doc cleaned the infection from the foot. She sang to the cow, keeping her as calm as possible. Every now and again she felt a swat when Clarissa swiped her tail across the air. She couldn't help but giggle when Clarissa hit Jack in the back of the head.

He grinned, moving his head the next time the tail came his way. Instead, it hit the doc on the head but he didn't seem to mind. It didn't even seem to phase him.

"All done." Doc Hart stood and handed a jar of ointment to Jack. "You need to put this on her foot twice a day, morning and night for about a week. That should heal it up. I'll come back and check on her next Friday."

Even though Doc Hart wasn't an animal doctor, he still looked after them. He didn't have to but he did. Marlene waved as he left.

"Well, let's get to work." She clapped her hands together. "I'll need a pitchfork."

"You want to help me get rid of the hay?"

"I sure do. Come on, Jack. You afraid of a little hard work?"

He rolled up his sleeves. "That sounds like a challenge!"

Behind his house, a small shed held several pitchforks and shovels. He handed her one. “Let’s throw the hay in a pile over the fence. Since no one owns that land yet, we’ll burn the hay so no one else gets sick from it.”

Marlene didn’t wait for him to tell her any more. She stuck the pitchfork in the hay and flung it over the fence. Over and over, the two worked diligently until there was no more hay in the lean-to.

Jack went inside and brought two glasses of water. He also had a box of matches to burn the hay. It flared up with a whoosh. The two drank their water and watched the pile burn. Even Clarissa moseyed over to stand beside Marlene. She reached out and scratched behind the cow’s ears. Poor thing, if they hadn’t caught the infection, she may have died.

Jack was mesmerized. He wanted to kiss her. He had no choice. Knowing she feared men for some reason, he was trying hard to be gentle. He needed to kiss her.

He sighed and looked into her beautiful face.

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Jack gazed into her eyes then, those hazel orbs telling her things he wasn’t able to say. Was she falling for him? It was impossible. She had so many issues to figure out. The more she tried to shield herself from falling for another man, the more her feelings of hate inside were beginning to fade.

What was happening to her? She had been determined to live out her life a widow, protecting Charlotte from all the bad men she knew existed. The flames rose up, burning the infected hay while Jack kept staring at her as if he wanted to kiss her.

She was mesmerized. Dare she allow another man to kiss

her? No one had tried in five years. The last kiss she ever had was the one where, oh dear Lord, no! Don't let me remember that right now! She had to squash those horrible memories. This wasn't the time or place for them to surface.

Her heart began to beat faster. She stepped back from Jack, who took a step closer. He dipped his head and leaned in, covering her mouth with his own. Her mind wanted to scream, to move away, push him, but when he touched her lips she was drawn into him. It wasn't like that kiss with that horrible man.

It wasn't bad at all.

He was gentle.

A soft kiss upon her lips.

She sighed.

She took a small step closer.

Jack wrapped his arms around her shoulders. He was so gentle as if he knew she was scared.

She brought her arms up, around his waist, barely touching him.

He deepened the kiss, pulling her even closer.

Marlene's head was spinning. The kiss was delightful, special and she was glad he didn't let her fear keep him from kissing her. She needed this. Marlene needed to know not all men were animals. There were good men, too.

It had been a shame the last one had tried to have her killed.

Charlotte too.

Chapter 4

*F*or the next week, Marlene was so busy she barely had time to breathe. First thing after getting Charlotte off to school, she'd hurry to help Jack tend to Clarissa's foot. It had become their routine after a few days. She'd hum and sing to the animal as Jack tended to her foot. She looked forward to seeing him each day. In the evening, after supper, Jack stopped by to escort her and Charlotte to see Clarissa. Even the cow was starting to wait by the fence for their visit.

Charlotte wanted to ride the cow. Jack and Marlene laughed so hard the one evening when she tried to climb on. After a scolding, the little girl didn't try it again. She even gave Clarissa a hug and said she was sorry.

Jack scratched his head. "I tell you what, Charlotte. The old owner of this house had a wooden rocking horse. I believe it's in one of the rooms upstairs. Would you like to come inside and we'll see if we can find it? You can ride that without any problems."

Charlotte jumped up and down clapping her hands. "Yes, can we, Mommie?"

Marlene looked around. The streets were fairly empty this time of the evening. Maybe one or two townsfolk sitting on their porches. "I guess no one will take issue to us going inside, since we have the child along."

They followed Jack inside to a wide open foyer with a large

staircase that led to the second floor. It was quite extravagant. On the outside, it looked like a simple, white-washed two story house.

"Wow!" Charlotte said, her voice so loud it echoed through the high ceilings. She laughed so hard when the echo continued. After a few more times, the three were calling out names and words that echoed back to them.

Jack's laughter was so refreshing. She watched him as he carried on with Charlotte, calling out words with a deep voice and then changing it up to a high pitched one. He would be a great father. Her heart hurt at the thought she was moving on from her husband Mark. She had only been married to him less than a year before he had died. The man had been reckless, going out on the river when the weather was bad. He had been told not to.

His carelessness had left her with a child to raise alone. After realizing she had no skills to make her own way, Marlene had sent a letter to the mail-order agency to become a mail order bride. After several letters, she met with her future husband-to-be in Dallas. Her brother had told her not to do anything foolish, he'd make sure she was taken care of. But she didn't listen, not wanting to depend on him. Besides, he wasn't home much, always on the road doing Pinkerton work. No, she had to make her own decisions.

The day she met up with John Abbott was when the horror began. The insulting kiss he bestowed upon her should've warned her then. She sighed. No sense in recreating something that had been put to rest five years ago. In time, she'd forget. She hoped.

"Mommie, come on." Charlotte held out her hand, bringing Marlene back to focus on the reason she was here. It did no

good to think of the past. Not when things were going so good.

Jack took them into another room to the right, a parlor. “I’ll be right back.” They sat down while he went upstairs. Charlotte kept bobbing up and down on the settee.

“Please, no bouncing, Charlotte.”

The little girl tried so hard to stop. “Yes, ma’am.” Then she whispered in her mother’s ear. “I’m so excited I want to scream!”

Marlene smiled at the girl. “Patience is a virtue, my child. No more bouncing.”

While they waited, Marlene gazed around the small, neat parlor. There was a square wooden table alongside the settee, with several books and newspapers. Marlene picked up a small book with some feisty looking characters on the front. She realized it was a dime novel. She remembered seeing some at the news-stand in Dallas but never up close.

When she picked it up, the pages were thin, and the large words of the title made her curious. *The Secret Revengers or Tales of four brothers in pursuit of a killer! by J. Fergy.* Marlene studied the front page carefully. Then she turned the page. *Come along with the four Winston brothers as they seek vengeance for the murder of their father. In the next episode, the boys discover a secret hide-a-way. Then, Bill comes across one of the gang members who shot and killed their father. Will they be able to catch the varmint? Be sure to stay tuned and buy the next instalment.*

When Jack entered the room with the wooden horse in his arms he stopped in his tracks and frowned. Marlene glanced up right then and wondered why he wasn’t smiling. She watched as his eyes were on the book she held. Had she been

too bold to pick it up without asking? Was she being rude? She placed the book on the side table and stood. Embarrassed, she waited quietly while Charlotte ran over to Jack.

"Is that the horsey?"

Jack quickly looked away, changing his frown to a smile. He knelt down to Charlotte's level and began to show her how to get on the wooden horse. It was just her size. She held onto the wooden handle and rocked back and forth. "Look at me, Mommie! Look Jack! I'm riding a pony!"

For the next half hour while Marlene rode the wooden pony, Jack seemed thoughtful. He didn't say much at all. She tried to make light conversation but he answered her without looking at her the way he usually did. He seemed so distracted. Was it something she had done?

"I think we better get home," she told Charlotte. Of course, the young girl complained that she didn't want to leave.

Jack spoke up. "It will be here for you tomorrow when you arrive to check on Clarissa. You can ride it again, OK? Now, your mother wants to get you home."

"Thank you." Marlene accepted his nod and helped Charlotte as they made their way outside. Jack accompanied them to their front porch and said good night.

"I'll see you both tomorrow," he told them, not looking at Marlene.

She didn't want him to leave on a sour note. "Charlotte, go on inside. I'll be right behind you." When she did as told, Marlene turned to Jack who was ready to walk away. "Have I done something wrong, Jack? You don't seem yourself tonight."

He stuffed his hands deep in his pockets and sighed. "I'm sorry, Marlene, it's not you. It's been a long day and I'm

feeling under pressure from my work."

"Oh, Jack! Are we too distracting? We don't have to come visit Clarissa in the evenings if you have work to do." Although, she was hoping he still wanted her there. She enjoyed how he picked her up and they all walked together like a family.

"Not at all, Marlene. You can never be distracting to me. I've got some thinking to do and then we'll talk. Can we go to supper together in a few days, just the two of us?"

"Of course. I'll ask Jennie and Mack to keep Charlotte on Monday evening. Although, it may be hard to tear her away from the wooden horse. I have a feeling she's going to want to come over every single day. Now that Clarissa is pretty well healed, we don't really need to visit daily."

"Yes, you do. It's good for you and for your daughter. And, for me." He took his hand out of his pocket and brushed it across her cheek. "And for Clarissa. She loves you. Goodnight, Marlene."

She watched as he turned and walked back to his place. There was something wrong, she just wasn't sure what.

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Jack wanted to kick himself in the foot. When he saw her pick up the dime novel he froze. Would she put two and two together and realize he was the author of that book? He had been writing under the pen name J. Fergy. Then someone found out who he was. After what had happened to his sister, he never, ever wanted anyone to know.

Now, he was afraid she'd find out. If he married her, Marlene would learn the kind of work he did. He didn't see that he could keep it a secret from her even though he wanted

to. Was that putting her in danger? He had tried to forget about the past and succeeded until he saw her holding the dime novel in her hands. Then, everything from the past flashed in front of him. His sister. Her death. All because of his work as a writer of published work.

He strolled past his house, past the field where they burned the hay and out of town. He needed to think. The darkness of the night would cloak him like Marlene's coat and hood did her. He wanted Marlene but didn't want her to know what he did for a living. This job had cost him so much. He had been through too much, blamed himself for his sister's death. If he married Marlene, he had to tell her everything. When he had told her he was going to marry her, for a brief time he forgot what had happened. Until he saw Marlene sitting there holding the book. Then it all came back like a Texas tornado destroying everything in its path.

He thought about telling her now, before he proposed. Except, what if she refused his marriage proposal? There would be one more person who knew about him. Could he really take that chance? He knew her to be honest and held secrets of her own, and yet, did he know her well enough to trust her?

Luckily, his editor and publisher, Mr. Beadle, was sworn to secrecy. It was the only way Jack agreed to continue to write the dime novels and newspaper articles required of him. He had that in writing, in the contract they both signed before he left New York City. His location was never to be exposed.

Jack walked for over an hour before turning back around. He knew it was going to be a long night. He walked past Clarissa, who was sitting down near the fence. She made a noise as he went by, causing him to stop and pet her. The

cow's presence made him think of Marlene and how the first time he saw her, truly saw her, she was singing her heart out to this cow, to soothe and calm the poor thing. Marlene had a heart of gold. He wanted her for his wife. Yet, he was scared. From the moment he saw her holding the dime novel in her hands, he realized he may not be the right man for her.

It broke him in two.

"What do I do, Clarissa? What the Sam hell do I do?"

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Every evening Jack continued to pick up Charlotte and Marlene, walking hand in hand to visit with Clarissa. Then, they'd go inside while Charlotte played on the wooden horse and have a glass of lemonade. Marlene noticed the pile of books and newspapers were no longer on the table by the settee. For some reason, the book she had held in her hands had upset Jack. Why? He had looked at her with a sadness she only felt when she thought her daughter was lost. She pushed that thought deep, deep down inside. There was no way she wanted to think of that time in her life or she'd lose her mind for sure.

The doctors in Dallas had wanted her to talk about what had happened to her. What they had wanted to do was send her to an insane asylum but as long as Mack was in charge, he told them no. The couple he hired to take care of them tried to get her to speak and became frustrated when she refused. They had treated both her and Charlotte well enough but she knew they wanted the two of them gone. The day her brother came to bring them both here was a glorious day she'll never forget. It was as if the past was no longer biting at her soul. No, she left the past in Dallas. Coming to Mill Ridge was a

new start, one that didn't include the horror of what happened. She had to learn to let it go, for her sake as well as her daughter.

She knew there was something eating at Jack. Something huge. There was something from his past, like hers, he wanted to forget and move on from. She sensed it was a struggle for him. Why did she think it had to do with the book she had held in her hand the other day?

Marlene sighed. He had been slowly bringing her out of her shell, day after day, unwilling to give up on her. She didn't wear her cloak any more, there was no reason to hide. Jack was slowly giving her the confidence back she had lost. Now, he was backing away.

She looked up to catch him watching her. Marlene gave him a smile. "I think we best get home."

He stood, tearing his eyes away like it was a hard thing to do. He collected Charlotte and they walked back to her house.

"Goodnight, girls."

Charlotte tugged on his hand. He leaned down while Marlene watched in awe as she gave him a kiss on the cheek. Her little hand reached up and rubbed in the kiss. "I wish you were my daddy," she said before she turned and skipped through the front door.

Marlene gasped. Jack stood up, speechless while his face grew pale. Marlene knew he had a hard time responding. What she witnessed was so precious and yet she didn't want to get Charlotte's hopes up. Jack may not want to marry her now. Did she even want to marry him? He was so distant that she didn't know if he had changed his mind. It was all too confusing.

"I have to go. Goodnight, Marlene." He turned abruptly, his

shoes making the same soft noise, only faster. Marlene leaned over the porch rail to see him picking up speed, then he was hurrying towards his house, past his house and into the darkness. He must be upset at Charlotte's words.

She'd have to talk to her daughter. The child meant well and yet it wasn't in her place to say such things. This was getting complicated all around. Her daughter was falling in love with a man she wanted for her daddy. Marlene was finally starting to feel comfortable in public, wanting to spend more time with Jack. Her brother and Jennie were getting married. Soon, she'd feel like a third wheel in their home, even though no one would ever ask her to leave.

She didn't want to be an old maid. Marlene stood on the porch, contemplating her next move. Perhaps it was time to speak to Jack about the whole situation. Except she wasn't about to go running down the street into the dead of night to find him. In the morning, that's when she'd tell him they needed to talk. This wasn't going to wait until their supper on Monday.

Except on Friday, she had forgotten the doctor was visiting again to check up on Clarissa. Not much after she got to Jack's house, Doc Hart showed up. She sang to Clarissa while he examined her.

He stood up, placing the hoof on the ground. "She looks healed. Everyone did a fine job taking care of her." Doc Hart turned to Jack. "I know you care about this old girl and she is supplying you with your means of income through her milk. Have you ever thought of sending her to one of the local farms where she'd have more space to roam free? This yard is pretty confined, Jack."

Jack nodded. "I don't need the income from her milk, Doc.

I've been thinking about it for awhile now. I got used to her being around and didn't want to send her somewhere where she'd be treated badly like the farmer I bought her from."

Doc Hart snapped his bag shut. "I have the perfect place for her. My sister Annabelle and her husband Grant have a a small farm beside the Holloway Ranch. Plenty of space there for Clarissa."

Jack shuffled his feet. "She means a lot to Charlotte. I don't want to sell her."

"Let me talk to my sister. I'm heading up there this afternoon. Perhaps you can keep her there for a small pittance. She really needs wide open fields, Jack."

Marlene watched the myriad of emotions play across his face. He knew the right thing to do was to set Clarissa free where she was able to roam and eat grass and not be confined in a small area. She looked at Jack. "We can arrange a weekly outing to go visit her if that is acceptable to the doctor's sister. What do you think?"

Doc Hart spoke up before Jack had a chance to reply. "I know my sister will not mind. She loves company, too. I'll stop by after my visit and let you know. Good day." He tipped his hat and let himself out of the gate.

"I think that settles things. Jack, you know the right thing to do is to give her the space she needs."

He nodded. "Are you talking about Clarissa?"

Marlene shuffled her feet. "Why, yes. Who else would I be speaking of?"

He grinned. "No one, I guess."

Marlene thought that was an odd statement for him to make as she made her way back to her house. She had a ton of work to do and wanted to do some cooking this afternoon. It helped

keep her mind occupied when she stayed busy.

Marlene had learned to make some pretty delicious sweets when they lived in Dallas. The couple they lived with thought it would be good for her to keep her mind occupied and they were right. It was a skill she enjoyed. Perhaps someday she'd open a sweet shop filled with confections and baked goods here in Mill Ridge. Wouldn't that be something, that's if she overcame her fear of people completely.

What Jack had done for her already was a good start, but she had a long way to go. Throwing on her apron, Marlene set out the ingredients she needed for some delicious molasses candy. She got the stove going, heating it to just the right temperature and placed a pot on top. Adding two cups of water and a cup of molasses, she let it boil, day dreaming about Jack as she stirred the concoction. When it thickened, she added a dollop of butter the size of an egg and a teaspoon of vanilla. Well, her idea of a teaspoon. Marlene didn't really measure too well since she made her candy by tasting it as she cooked.

While it was cooking, she place a bowl of cool water on the table, went to the pantry behind the kitchen area and opened the ice box for a few slivers of ice to keep the water cool. That's what stiffened the sweet treat. She wondered if Jack liked candy? A smile crossed her face thinking of him.

Once everything was blended, she took it off the stove and dropped a little in the ice cold water. The creamy thick piece turned brittle, exactly the way she wanted it to do.

"Perfect!" She repeated her efforts over and over again until she had half the table covered in chunks of brittle molasses candy. Charlotte would be in sweet heaven with all this! She'd wait until her daughter came home from school and let her

place the sweets in tins, that will give it plenty of time to harden to perfection.

Before she cleaned up her mess, Marlene took a break and poured herself a glass of lemonade, taking to the porch for some outside air. It was late afternoon, the busiest time of the day in Mill Ridge when folks got off work or finished up their purchases at the mercantile. She could see a good portion of Main street from where she sat. No longer wanting to hide behind all of her plants and flowers, Marlene had pulled a chair closer to the front of the porch.

She wasn't surprised any longer when a few of the townsfolk called her by name.

"Good afternoon, Marlene," the sheriff called out from across the street. She waved to him before he went back inside.

Yes, things were changing. She was starting to come out of her shell.

Was she good enough to marry a man like Jack? That is, if he asked? He told her he was going to marry her. Except now, Jack was acting standoffish and she didn't know why. She had wanted to discuss things with him but the opportunity hadn't arrived. Perhaps she'd have to wait until Monday after all.

Chapter 5

*M*arlene was getting ready to go inside when the man she had been thinking about approached. He was coming back down the street with his empty milk pail and stopped when he saw her.

"Doc Hart said his sister will let Clarissa board on their farm for one dollar a month."

"That's wonderful! I'd take her up on the offer."

"Plus, she'll make sure she gets milked and distribute it to the farm workers. That will free me up from having to milk her several times a day."

Marlene thought it was a shame because she'd miss seeing him when he walked by each day. She'd miss the evenings more, when her and Charlotte went to visit the animal.

"Would you and Charlotte like to help me get her there tomorrow morning? It's about a half hour ride to their farm. Doc gave me directions."

"We would love to accompany you. Charlotte will be thrilled. Hold on, I'll be right back." Marlene ran in the house, rummaging through a cupboard and found a small burlap sack. She placed a handful of the hard candies in the bag, tied it up and went back outside. "Here."

He looked pleased. "What's in the bag?"

"Well, why don't you look."

Jack, smiling, unravelled the tie and peeked inside. "My

weakness," he told her, his smile getting bigger. He reached in and popped a rather large piece in his mouth. Closing his eyes, he chewed on the molasses candy for over a minute until Marlene began to giggle.

"I think you are attracting attention." His moans had a few townsfolk turning their heads, looking puzzled at Jack standing there looking like that.

He tied up his bundle. "They can't have any!"

Just as he spoke, Charlotte came ripping around the corner, Mack in tow. "Jack! Jack! Hello, Jack!"

He leaned down and Charlotte jumped in his arms. Marlene was getting concerned. She didn't want Charlotte to get too upset if Jack decided not to marry her. Even though her brother was always in the little girl's life, Charlotte was trying to bond with a man she wasn't sure wanted the same thing. She didn't ever want her little girl to suffer any sadness in her life. Marlene would make sure of it one way or another. When she looked up she saw her brother watching the two with the same wary look. No doubt she'd hear about it from Mack, too. He was overprotective at times.

Jack stood and patted Charlotte on the head.

"What do you have in the bag?" her little voice asked.

"Would you like to see?"

She nodded, her curls bouncing around. At least she was standing still, not jumping up and down like she normally does.

Jack opened the burlap bag. "Go ahead, put your hand in."

Charlotte trusted him completely and dug in without worry. Marlene almost let a tear slip down her cheek at their antics. She pulled out a piece of candy. Her eyes widened and when she popped one in her mouth, she giggled.

“You are silly, Jack. These are my mommies!”

Marlene laughed out loud. Her daughter knew her well. “There’s a whole table full inside, little one. I’ll bet you’d like to help put them in tins, wouldn’t you?”

That’s when she began jumping up and down.

“Settle down first. Why don’t you go inside and start. I’ll be right in. There is a tin on the table for you to fill.”

Charlotte waved while bouncing and heading inside, her little feet were speeding through the door before anyone could say another word. It made Marlene’s heart warm to see her child so happy. That’s all she’d ask for, nothing more. If Jack decided not to ask for her hand, she’d still be happy.

Heartbroken on one hand but happy her daughter was finally settled and in a place she loved. The city was not for them. Dallas was too much, it had brought out the worst of Marlene and she recognized it as such. No. Here is where she wanted to be. Alone, if that’s all she’d ever have.

“Good day, then, Marlene, Mack,” Jack nodded to each. “I’ll be by later for our walk.”

She sighed. This evening would be the last time they’d all three walk to see Clarissa. Then what?

Mack watched her closely. She always was aware when he had something on his mind. “Out with it, brother. What have you been observing with your eagle eye?”

“You know me well.”

“I sure do.” She placed her hands on her hips. “You may as well get it off your chest before you explode.”

He agreed. “I am worried about you, Marlene. You and Jack seem to be hitting it off just fine except there is a mystery about him I want you to be cautious about. Several folks in town have wondered themselves.”

She shrugged. “Honestly, Mack, what’s to worry about? He’s a good man. You know the kind of men I’ve dealt with. He is an angel compared to them.”

Mack waved a hand. “That’s not what I mean. Just be careful before you make any rash decisions. People wonder how he’s making a living besides selling the cow’s milk.”

“It’s not anyone’s beeswax, to be honest.”

“I worry he’s doing something illegal. Every Friday he sends a package through the mail. People say it seems mysterious. I don’t want you and Charlotte in the middle.”

“You have a license to investigate, sir. Why don’t you try to find out.” She was being facetious but the look on his face made her realize he was itching to put his skills to use again. “No, Mack, don’t you dare!”

He grinned. “You said I should.”

She picked up her skirts and turned to go inside. “Mack Everett, you stay out of my business. I’m a grown woman and if I wanted you to snoop around, I’d have asked. I trust Jack.”

Mack followed inside, not saying a word. The gears in his mind were already turning, she could tell. It probably didn’t hurt to make sure Jack was an up and up citizen. Had anyone ever asked him what he did for a living?

Perhaps someone should.

She knew her brother.

He was one of the Pinkerton’s finest agents until he retired.

Once he was on a case, he didn’t stop until the truth was revealed.

She had to put a stop to his snooping before that happened.

She’d ask Jack himself. If he were honest, he’d tell her the truth. If there was a truth to tell.

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Later that evening when Jack came to call, Marlene didn't want to ruin their last day visiting at Jack's place with Clarissa with a ton of questions about his work. First, they had to explain to Charlotte about the decision made for the animal's well being. Perhaps another time she'd ask him about his work. They had time.

After Charlotte was done petting Clarissa, she became restless. "Mommie, can we go inside now and ride the wooden horsey?" Clarissa was bouncing already.

"Well, first, we'd like to talk to you about Clarissa."

"Clarissa?"

"Yes, Clarissa. Jack, would you like to explain?" When their eyes met, she felt a bond so strong it pulled her towards him. Not in a physical way, but as if they understood they wanted the same thing. As if he understood her need to help her daughter understand the cow wasn't going away forever. She blinked her eyes, trying to wish it away.

"Sure. Charlotte, we learned from the doctor that Clarissa needs more space to stay healthy. And, we want her to always be healthy and never sick, right?"

Charlotte nodded. "Oh, yes, Jack. With all her milk she is healthier than anybody in this world!"

He squatted down to her level and laughed. "That's true, she is healthy. We want to keep her like that and by taking her to Doc Hart's sister's farm, she'll be able to have a large area to eat grass and make lots of milk. I'm afraid my back yard isn't big enough for her any more."

At first Charlotte looked devastated. "I won't get to see her after school?" Her lower lip formed a pout.

Jack smiled. “Of course you will. We will be allowed to visit her any time we like. I was thinking we can go every Saturday morning. How does that sound to you?”

Charlotte reached out a hand and put it on his cheek. “Will she have other kids to visit her all the rest of the times?”

“Yes, Annabelle has some children on the farm. I’m sure if you ask them tomorrow when we take her, they will be happy to keep an eye on Clarissa for you.”

Charlotte gave Jack a hug. “I can’t wait! I want Clarissa to have a big, big, big yard! Now can we go inside to play on the rocking horse?”

They both laughed. “Of course.” Jack stood and took her hand, then held out his other hand for Marlene. She took it as they went inside. They were like a family. Was Marlene prepared to risk it all for Jack to be a part of their lives? Her and Charlotte were a packaged deal. She had fought too hard to make sure of it.

She was so tired of the past and how it had a hold on her. Sometimes she just wanted to blurt it all out, what had happened that night except she was scared to death. Yet, Jack made her feel things she had never felt before. He was slowly bringing her around.

As she sat in the parlor while Charlotte played on her wooden horse, Marlene smiled at Jack when he brought her a glass of lemonade. He sat down beside her, not asking for permission.

Usually, Jack sat across the room in a wing back chair with plenty of room between them. Now, he was so close, she wasn’t sure she’d be able to breathe properly.

“Marlene, we have to talk.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

He frowned. “You were?”

She nodded. “Yes, I don’t think it is appropriate this evening but perhaps Monday when we go to supper.”

He agreed. “That sounds fair. Although, I wonder what is on your mind at this moment??

Did he scoot over a tad closer? Marlene swore she hadn’t smelled the scent of his cologne before. Now, it was clinging to her nostrils. She took in a deep breath.

He turned to her as if waiting for her answer. She wasn’t even sure at this point what the question was? Ah, yes, he wanted to know what was on her mind. “If I told you what is on my mind, you may never forgive me for my thoughts.” Had she said it out loud? Oh, she was becoming so bold with this man.

He grinned. “It may be possible I’ve got the same thoughts in my mind as well.”

“Oh?”

He moved even closer. His mouth was an inch from hers. “I’m thinking now is probably not a good time to kiss you. Except my thoughts and my heart are not in agreement.”

Marlene smiled. She knew exactly how he felt. She turned her head to see what Charlotte was doing. She was on the horse, her head leaning on the horse’s mane, eyes closed, sleeping. The rocker had stopped moving. She wasn’t looking at them. Perhaps a stolen kiss was possible.

When she turned back, Jack had the same idea. His mouth met hers in a stolen kiss she had wanted since she walked through the door tonight. Marlene put her arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

She felt his arms go around her waist, his big hands moving up and down her back. This was delicious and yet naughty,

kissing a man in front of her sleeping daughter! What kind of woman was she?

Marlene pulled back. “I dare not, Jack. This isn’t proper.”

He let her go and nuzzled her cheek. “It may not be proper but it felt right. Don’t you think so?”

“I do. Except, what if Charlotte was awake? What if she had woke up and saw us kissing?”

He laughed. “She’d jump up and down with glee and clap her hands.”

Marlene shook her head and stood. “I’m sorry. We must get home.”

He stood with her. “It’s time we discussed our relationship, Marlene. I’m in turmoil of what to do. I think it is time we had a talk about us on Monday. There are things you should know about me.”

Jack picked up a sleeping Charlotte and carried her home in his arms. When they got to her house, she opened the door and let him take her inside. As he went to leave, she placed a hand on his arm. “I agree we have to talk. I’m not ready yet to discuss everything about me. Not yet. I hope you understand.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. As he left, Mack came up the steps. The two spoke outside for some time while Marlene settled Charlotte in bed.

She waited for Mack to get done talking outside. “Did you give him a hard time?”

“Of course not. I heard he was taking Clarissa to the Hart’s farm tomorrow and wanted to make sure he had a buggy. He told me he already rented one from the livery. I am assuming you and Charlotte will be accompanying him?”

“Yes, he asked us both to go. Charlotte wants to make sure they will take good care of Clarissa.”

He watched her with his all-knowing hawk eyes. “And you?”

“I like Jack’s company.”

“Just remember what I said.”

“About his work? I have. Mack?”

He shook off his jacket, hanging it on the peg inside the door. When he looked at Marlene, he took her hand and sat her down. “What is it, sis? What’s on your mind?”

She was trying to figure out her mind. Talking it out with Mack may be helpful as long as he gave her all the right answers. She smiled to herself. Wanting and getting the right answers was two completely different things. “First, thank you for bringing me here, Mack. It has literally saved my life. Dallas was not for me. I hated the big city, too much noise.”

“Too many memories, I’m sure.”

“That too. There’s one thing you should know. Jack has brought me out of my shell. I feel alive for the first time in my life. I’m not hiding behind a cloak and hood. People are actually starting to get to know me. Even my life before all the horrible things with my husband Mark was lonely. He’d go for days and sometimes weeks at a time hunting or whatever it was he’d claim for that week. It got lonely in the cabin by the river.”

“I’m sorry, sis. I wish you’d have told me. I’d have given him a good talking to.”

She placed a hand on his arm. “He was too stubborn to take advice, even from you. Mark was determined until it killed him. I doubt the news of a child would have settled him down.”

Marlene had realized all of this over the months after she had lost her husband. He had loved living off the land, leaving

her at home so he had a woman to come home to. She had even asked him to take her along on his fishing and hunting excursions but he had refused. Said a woman's place was inside the house, not out on the frontier. It made her day to day life so lonely. When she realized she was having a baby, it was all she'd think about. Finally, someone else to love.

Then, when he died in the river and her brother had comforted her, she thought her life was over. Determined to stand on her own, she found out how foolish the idea was. Mack had gone chasing outlaws, which was his job as a Pinkerton. He vowed to help her but she didn't want to depend on him.

When she decided to become a mail-order bride to John Abbott, the real horror began. She shook her head. No sense in reminding herself what an utter fool she had been. The man was dead. Killed by the good folks of Mill Ridge. In a way, every single person in this town was a kindred spirit of some sort with each person trying to start over in a harsh world where it wasn't fair or easy.

She was glad Mack brought her here.

"Marlene, are you still with me?" Mack's voice drowned out the thoughts of that evil man. She took in a deep breath.

"I'm sorry. I started thinking about that day and -"

"You don't have to talk about it. Not if you don't want to."

She shook her head. "No, I don't want to. I actually want to put it all behind me. That's what I'm wanting to tell you. I have a lot of healing to do but I think Jack is the man I want to spend my life with. I trust him. I know you and some of the townsfolk are wondering who he is. I've seen his good heart. The way he treats Charlotte is astounding. The way he rescued a poor cow from an angry farmer shows me his heart. He has a

good heart. Maybe he wants to get away from a past that is haunting him, too. You know, like the one that has haunted me since forever ago. I am ready to move on."

Her brother gave her a huge hug. "Best thing I've heard, sis. I guess I owe Jack a thank you. Did he ask you for your hand yet?"

"Not yet. I think he wants to but there is something on his mind. We're going to talk Monday when we go to supper together. Would you mind keeping Charlotte?"

"I'll be happy to. And, as the new deputy under Sheriff Nightingale, I'll be more than happy to reserve you a special place at the restaurant Monday. I usually stop there every morning."

Marlene laughed. "I suppose you will be taking a special treat to your favorite teacher?"

"It appears so."

"Oh, Mack, you are in love."

"I sure am. So are you. Do me a favor. I've sent a telegram the other day to inquire about Jack. Don't go getting salty on me. It is my duty as a brother to make sure you are going to be in safe hands."

"I understand. After all we've been through I knew you'd do so anyway. Let me know if you find anything out."

"I will. Goodnight, sis. I have an early rising. Jennie wants to go over our wedding plans."

Marlene eyes went wide! "I have been neglecting my brother and your future wife! Forgive me! The wedding is next Saturday and I still haven't a dress to wear."

Mack shook his head. "This wedding stuff is too much! Why, all this fuss for what, twenty minutes at the alter. I can think of better things to do with my time than fussing and

carrying on about the perfect ceremony. We haven't even invited but a handful of people. She doesn't want a big fuss but it is turning out to be one in my book."

"Now, now, Mack! Every bride wants the perfect ceremony. I'll check in with Jennie tomorrow after we take Clarissa to the farm."

"She'll talk your ear off. I've been listening to it for the last few days."

Marlene listened as he ranted for the next ten minutes. Slowly closing her bedroom door, she giggled when Mack stopped all of a sudden realizing she was no longer listening.

In another minute his own door shut. She shook her head. There was no way she'd be fussing like that over a wedding. Nope. Not her.

Chapter 6

*M*arlene peeked out the window to see the buggy pull up in front of their house. Charlotte was jumping up and down, doing exactly what she was told not to do.

"Settle, now, young lady!" Marlene scolded as she passed by to answer the door. When she let Jack in he seemed in a happy mood this morning.

"Good morning!" he said, placing a quick kiss on her cheek. He whizzed by her and picked up Charlotte in one swoop. She giggled and kicked her feet. Her shiny patent shoes were going to get dirty on a farm.

"Charlotte, those shoes are not appropriate for a farm. Let's put on your older pair."

Jack waved a hand in the air. "No need. I think there is something in this sack for those feet!"

Charlotte squealed. "You brought me a present! Oh, Jack! I love you!"

Marlene's heart skipped a beat. She didn't want the child disappointed if Jack didn't want her. But every indication said he did. She'd soon know for sure. After their talk on Monday. What she had to tell him would determine if he stayed or not. She had thought about it all night long.

"If you are going to a farm, it's almost like being a cowboy or cowgirl, right?"

She nodded, her hair falling over her face. Charlotte

brushed it back, the anticipation glowing in her eyes. “I want to be a cowgirl!”

“Then you will need a pair of cowgirl boots!” Jack reached in the bag and pulled out a pair of leather boots. “Let’s see if these will fit.”

It didn’t take long for her to shake off her shoes and pull them on. They were a tiny bit big but Charlotte didn’t care. She walked around the room, having a bit of difficulty but giving it her best shot. She placed her hands on her hips. “Now I need a cowgirl hat!”

“Then you best look in the other bag I brought.”

Before long Charlotte was equipped with a new pair of boots and a wide brimmed hat. Marlene stuffed a sock in the tip of each boot so they fit better. She was ecstatic, running through the house, showing off. When she finally calmed down, she wore the biggest smile ever.

Marlene took a peek to see Jack watching her daughter with a proud look on his face. As if he wished she were his.

He tore his gaze away when he caught Marlene staring. A brow lifted and he grinned. “Didn’t realize she’d be that excited.”

“Charlotte is a happy child. She’ll get excited about the simplest things. Except this is huge. Thank you, Jack.”

He stood. “My pleasure. Guess we should be on our way. They are expecting us soon.”

The ride to Grant and Annabelle’s farm took longer than expected. They had attached a rope around Clarissa’s neck and tied it to the back of the wagon. She wasn’t too pleased to be taken from her little sanctuary or to have anything around her neck once again. “I understand how she feels,” Marlene told him as they had to stop and urge her on several times.

Jack shrugged. “It won’t be long, right up around this bend is the farm.” Twenty minutes later they rounded the bend to find lush grass and fields galore. The farm set back from the road so they turned down the path towards the front yard. Little holes were scattered all over the area where they wanted to park the buggy in the front of the house.

“Look at those!” Charlotte pointed. Little prairie dogs peeked their heads out from a few of the holes. As soon as they realized they were being watched, they were gone.

“Don’t go near them,” Jack warned. “You don’t know if they bite.”

“They look so cute!”

Marlene had to laugh. Her daughter loved everyone and everything. She was so glad she had tried to shield her from the worst of life’s troubles. Being here in Mill Ridge would give her daughter a wonderful place to grow up, away from the big city and horrible men.

A screen door slammed. Marlene looked up to see two little kids, one boy and a girl trailing across the wooden porch. “Over here!” They waved their little hands and arms.

A woman came out, young and beautiful with long golden hair, held back from her face but it’s golden locks flowed down her back. She held a baby in her arms. “Don’t walk across the prairie dog holes. Come around to this side!” she directed, waving towards the left.

They left Clarissa tied to the buggy and walked towards the welcoming family. Charlotte walked right up to the two children. “Hi. I’m Charlotte. I brought you my best friend, Clarissa.”

The little girl smiled. “I’m Sadie and this is my brother John.” She pointed to the baby in her mother’s arms. “That’s

my baby sister Katie cutie pie. Hush, she's sleeping."

Charlotte gave Sadie a hug. "Do you want to see my cow?" She tugged on Sadie's sleeve and the two worked their way over to the buggy. The little boy followed behind.

Annabelle called out. "John, stay with your sister!" She welcomed Marlene with a huge smile. "Welcome to my madhouse. I'm Annabelle and you must be Marlene and Jack."

Her husband Grant came out from the barn, shaking hands and introducing himself. Soon, Jack and Grant went on their way back to the barn and to look at some new horses he recently purchased.

"Come inside, let's get some lemonade and we can sit on the porch while the little ones play."

Marlene helped her get glasses of lemonade for everyone, set them on a tray and went back outside. She held the baby for a time, cradling the infant in her arms. "She's beautiful," Marlene whispered, aching inside for another child of her own.

Right before she handed the infant back, Jack and Grant left the barn to take Clarissa to the pasture. She noticed his eyes on the baby, then on her own and his gaze softened. Was he wondering what it was like to have a child? Marlene was touched by the sincere look in his eyes.

"It's so nice to have you here, Marlene. It can be lonely living on a farm. Even with Elizabeth a half mile away, we're busy with our children and don't always get to visit as much as we'd like to. Grant said you would like to bring Charlotte every Saturday to visit with Clarissa?"

Although she didn't want to hand her over, the baby was searching for food. Annabelle settled the child on her lap, throwing a blanket over top and began to feed her. "If you

don't mind, we'd like to bring her to see Clarissa. At least until she moves on and finds something else to love."

Annabelle laughed. "Ah yes, children do tend to do those things. Little John, who is named after my brother, had a kitten he thought he wanted to keep. When he realized he'd have to feed it milk every few hours, somehow it disappeared to the barn."

They laughed over that, then watched as Clarissa refused to move from the buggy. "Take off the rope from her neck!" Marlene shouted. When Jack nodded and did as she requested, the animal began to mosey around the yard. Between the two men and all three children, they finally got her inside the fenced area. The kids stood on the railing petting her as she tried to get used to her new home.

"Thank you for letting us keep her here. Jack's yard isn't big enough. Your brother was kind enough to suggest we let her go."

Annabelle smiled. "I can see how much everyone cares for her." She finished feeding the baby and handed her back to Marlene. "I made some sandwiches and set up a table alongside the house. Why don't we collect everyone and have something to eat."

"How nice of you," she told her, not minding at all if she had to tend to the baby while Annabelle got the food out. She followed her to the side of the house where a custom wood picnic table and benches were set up and a smaller table to set the food on.

Once Annabelle had all the food on the table, she went back out front and rang the bell attached to the front porch. The children came around the corner so fast, Marlene thought they were going to plough straight into the table. "Walk, ladies and

gentleman!" At her tone, the children came to a screeching halt.

Annabelle came around the corner. "Have we washed up yet, children?"

The three looked back and forth at each other and ran for the well out front. Annabelle shook her head. "We go through this each and every day, sometimes they think I'm too mean. What they don't know is I love this life. Although it can get tedious, I would never trade it for anything."

Marlene didn't say much more after that. She was content to hold the baby while she slept, enjoying the talk between the men and the children's laughter. When it was time to clean up, she insisted on helping, placing the baby in her father's arms while she slept. As she went inside she noticed how Jack kept watching the sleeping baby.

Yes, he had what was called baby fever.

It made Marlene smile so wide she wasn't able to keep her happiness to herself.

Annabelle didn't know her well but she recognized something was going on. "Well, what has you so happy all of a sudden?"

Marlene hugged herself. "Jack. Did you see the way he kept staring at the baby?"

"I'm afraid I hadn't noticed." Annabelle began to put a few extra sandwiches in a small basket. "While you were busy staring at your man, the children asked if Charlotte may stay here and go to church with us in the morning. We can drop her off afterwards, or at church, whichever you think is best."

It wasn't too often Charlotte was away from her. Marlene bit at her bottom lip, trying not to seem nervous. She liked Annabelle and knew she'd take good care of her daughter.

Maybe it was time to trust someone. The bad men were dead. She had made sure of it.

Annabelle paused. “Marlene, are you ill? You look pale.”

She pulled herself together. “No, I’m fine. The thought of Charlotte away for a night has me worried. Not for her, I’m sure she’ll be fine. It’s me. I get anxious when she’s not home.” There, she told someone and didn’t know why. She usually kept things like that to herself.

Annabelle gave her a hug. “Then it’s high time you take a step back and do something kind for yourself. Here.” Her new friend shoved a small basket in her hand. “I didn’t see you eat much and Jack didn’t eat but one sandwich, which is highly unusual for a working man. On your way home, there is a small stream down yonder, right before you get to the last bend at Mill Ridge. It’s off the beaten path.” She went to the drawer of her hutch and pulled out a small tablecloth. “Take this. You two need some time together. Grant and I go there sometimes. It is a perfect place to spend time with your loved one.”

“Thank you.” Marlene didn’t know what else to say. They truly needed to talk and now more than anything, the opportunity was right in front of them. What she had to say really wasn’t appropriate for Monday evening at supper. The small eatery in town may be packed with townsfolk and she didn’t want anyone to hear what she was about to tell him. She was taking a risk. What she wanted to know from Jack, was he willing to risk his future on someone like her?

They waved as the buggy pulled away from the farm. Marlene saw how happy Charlotte was, playing with the other children and every now and again checking on Clarissa. “Notice how Clarissa is staying close to the fence?”

Jack nodded. “She will for a few days. When I first got her, she was afraid to move except for the times she opened the gate and wandered off, trying to get that bell off her neck. I am certain she’ll be happy here once she gets used to the wide open fields.”

“I believe you are right. It’s a beautiful place.”

“What do you have there?” He nodded to the basket on her lap.

Marlene wiggled her eyebrows. “A treat for the two of us. When you get to the last bend, there is a place to pull the buggy over and we can walk to the creek. Annabelle suggested it is a nice place to have a little picnic.”

He frowned. “Didn’t we just eat?”

“Jack. It’s where Annabelle and Grant go to be alone.”

He leaned in, smiling. “Ah, I see. Where I can kiss you without anyone mistakenly watching?”

“Possibly, however, you may not want to after we talk.” It wasn’t really proper to be alone with Jack and yet no one really went according to propriety in Mill Ridge. She trusted him and since no one in town said anything otherwise, she doubted there would be gossip. Unless someone came upon them at the creek, no one would know they ever stopped.

She said it in such a serious manner, a crease in Jack’s brow was evident. “I doubt there is anything you tell me that would change my mind about how I feel about you.”

His statement was bold. It gave her goosebumps knowing he cared for her and yet she had never told anyone the truth of that fateful night. Not even her brother. Yet, if she were to start a new life with this man, she had to be honest and tell him what happened. It was now or never.

“I believe the bend is right up there.” She pointed to a place

in the road where they were able to park. Jack helped her down and she took the basket along with the tablecloth as they walked through some tall grass to get to the creek.

The sound of water flowing and the coolness in the air gave hint they were close. A few trees hid the creek from view. They went around the trees to find a small grassy hill. “I believe this is the perfect spot for a picnic.”

“Let me have the tablecloth.” Jack opened it up and spread it on the ground, while Marlene set the basket down first, then herself. It took Jack a few minutes to join her as he was checking out the creek bank.

“What are you doing there, Jack?”

“Trying to see if this is a good fishing area. I wouldn’t mind spending some serious time here.”

“Well, did you find any fish?”

He came back and sat down beside her. “I didn’t see anything from the bank. They probably heard us a mile away.”

She giggled. “Do you think fish can hear you? That’s silly.”

He grinned. “It’s what I heard. All my life I was told to stay quiet so the fish don’t hear you.”

Marlene had never heard such a story. “Are you possibly telling me a fish tale?” Her eyes crinkled with laughter when he threw his head back and laughed out loud.

She opened the basket and handed him a sandwich. “I believe it’s turkey. Care for one?”

He nodded. “I’ll never refuse food, that’s for sure.”

They munched on their food for a few minutes. Marlene had a hard time swallowing, let alone finishing. She waited until he was all done and took his hands. “We need to talk.”

He frowned. “I thought we were going to do that on Monday night?”

“We have an opportunity to now and I doubt what I have to say is proper for a restaurant.”

Her words caught his attention. “Marlene, I know there are things from your past. I don’t care about them. I don’t need to know everything. If it is too difficult to talk about, then let it rest with you.”

She shook her head. “No, Jack. I can’t. I’m not sure if I deserve any happiness.”

“Of course you do. Probably more so than anyone I know of.”

Her hands shook. He tried to still them when he took her soft hands in his. She looked directly in to his eyes. She had to see his true reaction when she spoke the next words. “I killed a man.”

He stared. Jack tried to hide the surprised look on his face but she had already seen it. She closed her eyes for a moment. If he wanted to run, now was his chance.

She felt his warm breath so close to her. “Open your eyes and look at me.”

She was afraid, so worried she would see disgust there. His fingers lifted her chin. “Come on, look at me.”

She opened her eyes. He wasn’t looking at her with disgust or horror or even disdain. His eyes were caring, loving, curious. “What happened?” he asked. “If you want to tell me, I’ll listen.”

She took a deep breath and her whole body shook. “I have to tell someone, it is eating me up alive. My husband died on the river, he drowned. I was alone living in a cabin outside of Dallas with a child on the way. My brother was always gone, he was a Pinkerton back then.”

She stopped to catch her breath.

“Go on.”

“I didn’t want my brother to be forced to take care of us so I signed up through an ad to become a mail order bride with the stipulation I had a home for me and the child.”

She was staring at the ground, trying to recall each dirty detail.

“Then what happened,” he urged.

“John Abbott is what happened. He wanted slaves, not mail order brides. He had many women in rooms, locked away, trying to sell them to men of ill repute. John Abbott offered to buy my cabin except I never saw any money. Instead, I was sent to this terrible place until the baby was born, it was horrible. Men guarded the house day and night and we could not leave. There were several of us there, living in squander.” She shivered at the memory. She had eaten better than any of the other women though. Abbott ordered the men to leave her be until after she had the baby. He said with her looks she’d bring a good price. That’s when he grabbed her hair and kissed her with his rotten mouth. She made it through the kiss but had no idea what horror awaited her child.

She felt an arm slake around her shoulder. The warmth of Jack’s body close to hers enabled her to continue her story. “After the baby was born, I fed her for a few days until one night, John Abbott ordered all of the women to be loaded on to this awful enclosed cart. It looked like a circus caravan. I was left there in the cabin with my child, alone with one guard.”

She shivered. “I didn’t think much about him or any of the others. Sometime during the night, I felt something was wrong. I went to reach for Charlotte, who had been sleeping in a small box with a blanket beside me on the floor but she was

gone. I screamed, calling her name over and over again. The door to the cabin was unlocked and I stumbled outside.

The man who had stayed behind had my baby in his arms. He was moving closer to a wooded area and I followed behind, determined to find out where he was going with my child. I picked up a piece of wood from the porch, determined to fight him if he tried to hurt her. After about a mile, he stopped, unaware I was right behind. I placed a fist in my mouth so as not to cry out for my baby."

Marlene gasped for air, the memory too vivid, as if it were happening over again.

His gentle words directed her back. "It's fine, you're safe, Marlene. Look at me."

She did. This man was here, he wasn't going to hurt her or her daughter. She took in a few steady breaths. "I'm okay now."

"You sure? You can stop any time."

She shook her head. It was time to spill her guts. She didn't know what was going to happen to her after this. She supposed Mack would have to be told. Then the sheriff. She shivered again. Jack's arm tightened around her shoulder. "I looked at the ground in front of him, the loose dirt. It was, oh dear God, it was!" She put her hands over her face and sobbed. Jack held on, letting her be. She didn't dare look at him or she'd fall apart. "It was a grave."

"Marlene." His soft voice was what she needed to finish her story.

"A grave the size of my child. He was going to get rid of her. I don't know what came over me but I ran up behind him and with all the strength in me, I hit him over the head as hard as I could, hoping the moment he began to fall I'd snatch

my child out of his arms."

The tears began. Jack tried again to wipe them away. She stilled his hands, squeezing them as if they were her life's blood. "He was so surprised, he stumbled and backed up a few steps. Then a look of surprise and horror came over him and he fell backwards into a ravine with my daughter in his arms." Her body shuddered. "I thought for sure I killed Charlotte along with him. I climbed down that ravine so fast I'm pretty sure I slid the whole way. My daughter was fine. She was encased in his arms, never one bump or bruise on her."

Jack pulled her closer and let out a sigh. "I'm so sorry, Marlene."

She swiped at more tears that fell. "That's not the whole story. I took my daughter and left that man there to die. He had called out to me to help him. Apparently he had fallen on a limb, a sharp point of it sticking through his leg. He wasn't able to move. I climbed up the ravine with my daughter and never looked back. I killed a man that night and I don't care. I'm glad he is dead. He tried to kill my daughter. I swear the Lord above woke me up from a dead sleep, otherwise, he'd have her buried in an unmarked grave."

"You've been through so much."

"I ran in to the woods like a posse was following me. We lived off the land for three weeks until my brother found me. I never told him about the man I left there to die. He doesn't know. I guess it's time to."

"You don't have to tell anyone else, Marlene. No one will blame you. That man created his own destiny. You were trying to save your daughter." Jack leaned in and kissed her softly.

"I have a heavy burden on my chest, Jack. My brother saved us, he gave me back my life. I owe it to him to tell him what I

did."

"If you believe so, I'll be there when you want to tell him."

"Thank you. What if I go to jail? Jack, I don't know what I will do if that happens."

He helped her stand up. "We better get moving. Marlene, what you did was in self defense. Anyone will say so. To save your child like you did takes a lot of guts."

"Don't you see, Jack! You can't be with me if I'm labelled a murderer!"

Jack took her in his arms and held her there until every single tear dried up. "I'll be here for you, no matter what."

"You're too good for me, Jack."

He took both her hands in his, then slid to one knee. "Marlene, in spite of everything I find myself in love with you. I know marriage is a big risk but I do believe we both have what it takes to make a go of it. Will you marry me?"

Tears fell so hard she wasn't able to answer. "You, you still w-want to marry me after everything I told you?"

"Yes." Her heart filled with love.

When she nodded, he stood up and held her in his arms, placing a sweet kiss on her lips that stirred her insides. He still wanted her. "I think I'm falling for you too, Jack."

He gave her a knowing grin. "I suppose you are. I have to be as honest as you, although I can't tell you everything quite yet. Do you trust me?"

"I think so."

"Come on, let's walk back to the buggy." While they gathered everything up, he held her hand as they walked once more through the tall grass. "The town is right in thinking I'm holding something back. I am."

Marlene stopped to look at him. "For heaven's sake, Jack,

what is it?"

"I need you to trust me. It's about what I do for a living. I can't tell you yet. Promise me you'll trust that I need a little time before I disclose my work to you."

Marlene gave him a curious look. "Are you an undercover man like my brother? A Pinkerton?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid your brother would know if I was. No, sorry. Trust me, please. I have to speak with my boss first before I disclose anything."

She let him help her in the buggy. "I told you my story, Jack. The least you can do is promise me that before we get married, you'll let me in on your secret life?"

He gazed in to her eyes with so much adoration she almost told him she didn't need that reassurance.

"I promise," he said, then commenced to kiss her again, more deeply this time.

Chapter 7

*J*ack whipped the reins harder than he had intended to. After seeing Marlene to her door, he stopped by the saloon, a place he hardly ever entered but he needed desperately to let off some steam. He didn't want to go home yet. Not when his thoughts ran to wanting to strangle all those men who tried to hurt Charlotte, even if they were already dead and buried. "I'll take a sarsaparilla," he told the barkeep. "And a shot."

After a drink, he noticed the sheriff standing outside the saloon. Jack made his way through the doors. "Evening, Sheriff."

Nightingale nodded and tipped his hat. Jack was about to take a step off the porch when he noticed Marlene walking straight for the saloon. She pulled up her skirts to make it across without getting the hem of her dress muddy. "Sheriff! Sheriff! I'm turning myself in! Arrest me!" She dropped the hem of her skirts and held out her hands as if she were going to be cuffed right there in the middle of the street.

Nightingale pulled away from the post he had been leaning on. "Miss Marlene, what is this about? Lower your voice, you'll have everyone in town over here!" The sheriff tried to quiet her down but she was beside herself.

Marlene gave Jack a sad look. "I'm sorry, Jack. I can't live with myself any longer. Telling you made me realize I had to make this right."

He was almost right and he understood. “Sheriff. Can we go to your office? I think I can straighten this all up.” Jack put an arm around Marlene and whispered in her ear. “Let’s get off the street or everyone will be staring.”

“I’m used to stares, Jack. Don’t try to stop me. I listened to what you said but the more I got to thinking, I deserve to be

put in jail for my sins.”

Jack had enough. “If you don’t lower your voice, everyone is going to be talking about how I hauled you over my shoulder to the sheriff’s office. Now, do you want to walk there or have me carry you?”

She gave him a stare and then turned and led the way. Sheriff Nightingale shook his head and followed behind. “This is a first,” he told Jack.

“Wait until you hear the whole story, then you’ll understand.”

“I can hear you two. Stop talking.”

“I’m sorry, Marlene.” Jack knew she was upset but he was pretty sure she wasn’t going to be sent away for murder. She never even checked if the man had lived or died. He may well be alive for all she knew. Of course, since she had kept quiet about the whole mess, no one would have given her that information willingly.

When they were all seated inside the sheriff’s office, Marlene insisted on placing herself in a jail cell. “It’s for the best,” she told the sheriff.

“I can’t put you inside the jail until I know what happened.”

Instead, she plunked down in a hard back chair on the opposite side of his desk in defeat. “Well I want to admit to killing a man.”

He pushed his hat back. “What did you say?”

"It's true."

Jack held up his hand. "You don't know for sure if it is true. You are assuming."

The sheriff leaned in, staring Marlene straight in the eye. "Marlene, your brother told me what happened. He wanted me to understand what you went through so we can all protect you from anyone who ever comes to this town. Does your brother know about this man you allegedly killed?"

She shook her head. "I never told a soul. Until Jack."

The sheriff looked at him with a raised brow. "That part is true," Jack admitted.

Footsteps clunked on the outside porch right before the door swung open. Mack's large body came through the door. "Marlene, what's going on here?" His thunderous voice stopped everyone.

Marlene stayed calm. Her hands were twisted together in her lap but she held her own. Jack was proud of her.

"Mack, come take a seat," the sheriff offered.

"I'll stand. Sheriff, why do you have my sister in here and the whole town is gossiping that she murdered someone!"

"Wait, hold on. Mack, calm yourself." Nightingale turned to Marlene. "Tell your story. We're patient men." He leaned back while Marlene repeated everything she had told Jack earlier.

Her brother came to her side, knelt down and took her hands. "Marlene, do you mean to tell me all this time you kept this secret to yourself, thinking you killed someone?"

She nodded, tears of shame rolling down her cheeks. Jack wanted to go to her but knew this was a moment between brother and sister. Mack wrapped his arms around her and spoke softly. "My dear sister, no one was killed that night. We found an injured man a few days later but no one was dead.

You didn't kill anyone."

"I didn't?" When the realization hit her, the look of relief on her face was priceless. Then she mumbled in to Mack's' shirt, "I probably should have killed the rotten, low-down excuse for a human being!"

Relief flooded through Jack. All this time she was living with the guilt she had killed someone. In his eyes it didn't matter if she had, the man had tried to murder her child. He'd do anything for his own child. He swiped at the sweat dripping from his brow. He'd do anything for Charlotte, even though she wasn't his. He hoped she would be someday though. Jack wanted to adopt her and give her a proper last name. He planned to talk to Marlene about it, but right now he had to fight his own demons before he took his bride-to-be to the alter.

Mack stayed to talk to the sheriff, while Jack offered to walk Marlene home.

When they got to her house, she insisted he sit with her awhile. "I don't much care what anyone thinks or speculates, we are soon to be married. I can't wait to tell Charlotte."

Jack obliged, spending the rest of the evening on the porch with her listening to how relieved her voice sounded. "You sound like a different person, Marlene."

She smiled. "Is that a good sign or a bad one?"

He leaned in. "It's wonderful. How long do we have to wait to marry?"

She shrugged. "I don't want to wait another day." Her hand snaked out and touched his face. He leaned into her warmth.

"How about next Saturday?" A female voice suggested out of the blue. Jack whipped his head around to see Mack and Miss Jennie standing there. They were on their evening stroll.

Mack must've went straight to the boarding house to pick her up. He may have even walked by but neither of them had noticed. They were too busy staring into each other's eyes.

Marlene spoke up. "Next Saturday is your wedding, Jennie."

She nodded, a sly smile on her face and leaned forward. "And, it could be yours, too. Why can't we have a double wedding ceremony?"

Jack thought Marlene was going to cry. "I can't interfere with your ceremony!"

"Nonsense. Why wait? Everything is almost finished. You can help with the rest and we can truly be sisters! What do you say?"

Marlene stood and leaned over the porch rail to give Jennie a hug. "I would love to." She turned to Jack.

"Yes, let's do it." He smiled but inside he warred with himself. That gave him only a week to get his affairs in order. He noticed Mack watching him. Perhaps it was time to talk to someone in this town.

Maybe tomorrow.

"I'll stop by after school on Monday, Marlene, with all the details for Saturday. I'm so excited."

After Mack and Jennie left, Jack took her hands in his. "Are you sure you want to do this so fast?"

Marlene nodded. "Yes. I think one of the reasons Jennie suggested a double wedding is so we can get our homes in order. It works out perfectly. I can pack during the week and have our things at your house before Saturday. Then, after the ceremony, Jennie can move right in here while Charlotte and I move in to your house. It's a grand idea."

Jack gave her a sweet kiss on the cheek. "You ladies are very organized. Can't say I would be."

“Well, that’s why you have me, Jack!”

“Would you like to take a walk?”

She snuggled closer on the bench seat. “I’d rather sit here with you and watch the night sky. Look!” A star shot across the sky, almost directly in front of them. “That’s meant for us,” she told him.

“I suppose it is.” Jack had a lot of work to do. He prayed to that shooting star and his Lord Almighty, he’d do all the right things so Marlene would always be safe. If he brought harm to her because of his own doing, his life would be over. Mack would kill him, for certain.

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Marlene gave Charlotte a big hug in church the next day. She had made it through the night without worry, even though the child’s presence was missed. “It sounds like you had a wonderful time,” she told her daughter.

“Oh, mommie, it was so much fun.”

“Hush, lower your voice, we are in church.” Charlotte giggled and then took her mother’s words serious when the preacher stood at the front. Her little legs flew back and forth during the sermon, accidentally kicking the underside of the pew. Marlene had to nudge her a few times. As soon as the service was over, Marlene knew to get her outside as soon as possible. The child was way too excited today to sit still any longer.

Jack met them out front. He gave her a look, the one that wanted to know if she gave Charlotte the good news yet. She shook her head. Now wasn’t the time, not yet. She wanted Charlotte to settle down first before she sprang the news on her. The three walked to the side of the church where a pot

luck social was set up in a grassy area. The three waited in line and helped themselves to some food before finding a spot beside the Grants. After they all ate, the children ran off to play a game with the other kids.

"Charlotte is a lovely young lady," Annabelle told her. "I'll forewarn you, I do believe next Saturday the children are making plans again."

Jack and Marlene looked at each other, realizing Saturday was the day to visit Clarissa.

"What is it?" Annabelle asked. "Is there something going on here you aren't telling me about?"

Marlene gave her a huge grin. "Next Saturday Mack and Jennie were having a quiet wedding at the church, nothing huge. Since Jack asked me to marry him yesterday after we left your farm, it has been decided to join them in a double wedding."

Annabelle screamed, throwing her arms around Marlene. "I'm so happy for you. It was the picnic at the creek, wasn't it?"

Marlene nodded, overwhelmed that someone was so excruciatingly happy for her. She valued Annabelle's friendship so much. "I may need some help getting a wedding dress."

"I'll help however I can. So will Elizabeth and I'll pass the word to the rest of the ladies in Mill Creek. You will have a bridal luncheon on Friday afternoon at two sharp."

Marlene looked worried. "I didn't tell Charlotte yet. I was waiting for the right time."

"I'll keep quiet until you tell her. But, do it today, I can't keep quiet for too long."

Another thought occurred to Marlene. "I don't think Jennie

wanted a big deal made of the wedding. They were planning a quiet ceremony on Saturday. I don't think they even invited anyone else. I don't want to mix up her plans."

Annabelle stood up. "In that case, it's time to talk to Miss Jennie. No one gets away with sneaking around Mill Ridge. She is an integral part of the town and therefore she will also be invited to the bridal luncheon if I have to drag her there myself." She turned and marched over to where Jennie and Mack were watching the children.

Jack whistled. "She is vocal. I heard she can be a handful. Her husband says it all the time."

Marlene laughed. "The two are a match made in heaven, that's what I saw. I believe she has to be tough to keep her husband in line. He was a loner and a Texas Ranger before they met, so I understand."

Jack nuzzled her cheek. "Are you going to keep me in line?"

"If you are naughty, yes."

They both burst out laughing. Some others at the table looked their way, but Marlene didn't care. She had been quiet for far too long. It was time to enjoy her life. Jack made her laugh and smile whenever she was with him.

On the way home, Charlotte took both their hands and skipped down the street in between the two. It was hard for them to keep up. The girl had an enormous amount of energy. "My goodness, Charlotte. Slow down or you'll wear us out!"

Jack roared with laughter. Which made Marlene burst out giggling and then Charlotte began to jump up and down more, her giggles heard above everyone. When they all sobered up, Marlene thought it was as good a time as any to speak with Charlotte.

"How about if the three of us sit on the porch and watch the

world go by?”

“Can we, Mommie? Can we have some lemonade?”

“I’ll go get some but you have to promise me to settle down now.”

She placed her hand over her little heart and gave a big smile. “I do.”

Jack helped get Charlotte settled while Marlene went for the drinks. She brought them out on a tray. Jack stood and took the tray, waiting until she was settled before handing her a drink.

Marlene took a deep breath. She was almost certain Charlotte would be happy about the news and yet it still made her nervous. It had only been the two of them for five long years. “Charlotte, Jack and I have some news.”

Her little cheeks pinked as she smiled. “Is Jack going to be my daddy?”

Marlene wanted to see Jack’s reaction. His face softened and he nodded. “If you will have me as your daddy, young lady, then yes.”

She tilted her little head. “Are you going to marry my mommie?”

Jack smiled. “Yes, as long as it’s fine with you.”

Charlotte nodded, her little curls starting to bounce, along with the rest of her. Then she stopped. “Mommie, does this mean we get to live at Jack’s house?”

Marlene smiled. “Yes, honey, we will.”

Her little eyes got so wide. “I get to ride the wooden horsey any time I want?”

“Well, that depends if you behave and do your chores.”

“I like chores.”

“Well, then you will have no trouble.”

“Will we get to see Clarissa every Saturday?”

“Yes, dear, we’ll go as a family and maybe even stop and have a picnic along the way.”

She clapped her little hands together, forgetting she held a drink in her hand. The lemonade splashed over the brim of the glass.

Marlene waited for the next question.

“Mommie?”

“Yes, dear?”

Can I invite John and Sadie to my new house?”

Marlene looked to Jack. She didn’t want to overstep her bounds right away. He had been a bachelor up until now. Having her and Charlotte would take some adjusting to. “How about if we wait until we are settled to decide that. We’ll have to discuss overnight guests with Jack.”

Charlotte nodded and turned to Jack. She didn’t say a word, her little chin shot up in the air, and her little brows were raised up. When he looked at her serious expression, Jack grinned. “I’m sure we can make arrangements. How about if we get through the wedding next Saturday first?”

“We’re getting married on Saturday! I can’t wait! I’ll have a new daddy by Saturday!”

“Settle down, young lady. Now, let’s watch the stars, it’s starting to get dark out. Look at that cluster up there.” Marlene knew how to distract her daughter, she loved watching the sky. After awhile, she leaned against Marlene, her little eyelids drooping.

Jack scooped her up in his arms as Marlene opened the door. After she got the child tucked in to bed, Marlene came back outside to see Jack standing on the porch, staring at the sky. “Everything okay, Jack?”

“Everything is fine.” He turned to smile but she noticed a worried look on his face. Perhaps he was having regrets. Second thoughts? He held out an arm and she slipped in beside him. They stood there for the longest time before she heard him let out a long sigh. “I better go.”

She needed to know they were making the right decision. “Jack? Are you certain you want to marry me on Saturday?”

He stared down at her then encased her cheeks in the palms of his hands. “I would marry you tonight if it were possible,” he told her in that gravely voice of his.

“That’s all I needed to know,” she told him, before raising her mouth to his in a slow, deep kiss.

Saturday couldn’t come any sooner.

Chapter 8

*J*ack had sent the telegram first thing in the morning. The telegraph office was closed and he hadn't heard anything yet. It was Monday evening and he was about to pick up Marlene for their supper date. Not knowing what his boss thought of his impromptu idea made him nervous. He had told his Publisher he was getting married on Saturday and needed it all taken care of by then.

Surprised at no response, he decided to have a nice supper with Marlene and send another telegram in the morning. Once he was reassured everything was taken care of, he'd tell his bride-to-be the truth of the matter. It had been weighing heavily on his chest these past few days. He didn't want to start their new life together with any secrets.

She had been honest with him.

Marlene had every right to know the truth about him.

Not yet, though. Not until it was taken care of.

He knocked on her door and adjusted his jacket as he waited for it to open. A little face peeked out. "Hello, Charlotte. I've come to take your mother to supper."

The door opened wide. "Hello, Jack. I told everyone in school today that you are going to be my new daddy." He noticed she wasn't smiling like she always does. He bent down on one knee.

"What's wrong, Charlotte?"

She sniffed, her little face looking at the ground. “One of the boys said I was telling a tall tale and then everyone laughed at me.”

He reached out and picked her up, holding her up to meet his gaze. “Now, Charlotte. We’re going to make sure there’s no misconception about me being your daddy. I’m coming to school tomorrow and tell them myself!”

Her eyes got huge! “You will?”

“I sure will and I’ll tell you what else. If your mommie doesn’t mind, instead of staying here with your uncle, why don’t you come along with us to supper and I’ll tell everyone in the restaurant, too! Soon, the whole town will know I’m going to be your daddy!”

Charlotte slid out of his arms and ran in to get her mother. Jack wanted to find the kid that made fun of her and have a talking to the boy’s father but he knew that was overdoing things. He had to be careful how he approached this new role. He didn’t want to advocate violence and yet the boy was upsetting with his soon-to-be-daughter.

Marlene was led outside by little Charlotte in the lead. Jack had waited on the porch, a bit nervous. He turned. “My two favorite ladies.”

Marlene gave him a huge smile. She looked relieved. “Thank you for inviting Charlotte along. She was quite distressed to the point I was afraid of canceling our supper.”

“No need. Are you two ladies ready to go for supper?” He held out an arm for each of them. Charlotte’s hand reached up for his. This child was looking up at him with all the trust in the world. He wasn’t about to let a bully discourage her or intimidate her. She would learn to stand up for herself and he’d help. After all, as her soon-to-be father, it was the proper

thing to do.

The line was long at the restaurant this evening. It was a rather small building but the only one in Mill Ridge to get a decent supper. Besides, the saloon wasn't proper for his two ladies. He tried to keep Charlotte entertained by making funny faces behind her mother's back but each time he did, Marlene turned around and caught him, causing Charlotte to giggle even more. The others in line laughed along until two or three other townsfolk began to play, too.

When they were seated after a twenty minute wait, Jack quickly ordered the daily special for everyone and a glass of fresh milk for Charlotte. While they waited for the food, he stood up, a knife in one hand and a glass in the other. He commenced to tap the glass. "May I have everyone's attention, please!"

The crowd settled after a moment. Everyone seemed curious now as all eyes were on him. "I have an announcement to make. Make sure to spread the word and tell everyone Marlene and I are getting married this Saturday!"

The crowd clapped and whistled. A few shouts were heard. He tapped the glass again. "I'd also like to announce and you can tell every single person in the town that I am proud to call Miss Charlotte, Marlene's five year old daughter, my own as well. I will be her daddy!"

Charlotte clapped like nobody's business. Her smile was so wide and she smiled for so long Jack thought she'd never stop. When the food arrived, he sat down at the table. Marlene gave him a grateful look while the child dug into her food. She only looked up when her mother coughed several times.

"Charlotte," Marlene scolded. "Take my hand, please."

They said prayers and it didn't take Charlotte long to finish

her food. “Are you done already, young lady? How about some dessert.”

She shook her head. “No. I want to go home to bed so tomorrow hurries up.”

Marlene leaned in closer to discuss her manners. His heart swelled watching the two of them. Even though he had a deadline to meet before their wedding, he wasn’t about to disappoint her. He’d walk in to the school tomorrow and show them she was telling the truth. No one was going to laugh at her again. It was worth it to see the smile on her face. She trusted him completely. That’s what Jack took home with him that night. The two women who meant the world to him. Their beautiful smiles. It was worth everything he was about to do.

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An oversized buggy rode through the center of town late Thursday evening. Marlene and Jack were taking their evening stroll, with Charlotte in the middle. It had been a hectic week trying to get ready for Saturday’s ceremony. “This is nice,” Marlene said out loud. “It’s been quite a fast-paced week, hasn’t it?”

Jack agreed. “It has, but you are right. This is a nice walk. I’m enjoying our stroll. I hope we continue it even after we are married.”

Charlotte agreed too. “I hope you don’t leave me behind.”

“Never, darling. You can come, too.”

“Do I get to come to the bride party tomorrow?”

“I believe so. The whole class will be escorting Miss Jennie to the Jenning’s Farm. It’s going to be quite the luncheon. Elizabeth and Annabelle have invited some of the ladies from

Wichita Falls to join in the festivities." Her wedding gown was almost finished. She didn't know how these ladies were going to pull it off but they swore it would be done in time. Elizabeth had an older gown she donated, while Annabelle had lace and one of the other ladies donated long white gloves. They planned to show her the final details tomorrow at the luncheon.

"It sounds like something I need to stay away from," Jack joked.

Marlene grinned. "I believe you'll be plenty busy yourself. According to Mack, the men have something planned for the two of you."

Jack groaned. "I do have plenty of work to keep me busy."

"Look at that horsey!"

The buggy had stopped in the middle of the street. All eyes were on it when the door popped open and a fancy dressed fellow worked his way out of the enclosed carriage. Not too many people used them much. Residents usually had to haul merchandise around and a wagon or open buggy was much easier.

Jack grinned. "I'll be! This is better than a telegram!"

The man picked up a small carpetbag and walked towards Jack. "I'll say this is in a remote area! Took me four days by train, and a buggy to get here."

Marlene watched as the two shook hands. Jack turned. "Marlene, this is my boss, Mr. Beadle. I believe he decided to attend our wedding."

She tried not to show surprise. This was the first he spoke about what he did for a living. "Hello, Mr. Beadle. How are you?" The man shook her hand with a firm grip.

Jack motioned for Charlotte to come forward. She walked

slowly as if the man may bring her harm. “This is Charlotte. I am going to be her Daddy.”

Charlotte’s eyes crinkled as she nodded, no longer scared. “Hello. Do you know what Jack did the other day?”

Mr. Beadle furrowed his brows. “What did Jack do?” He looked on in amusement, first at Jack, then Charlotte.

“Well, he came to my school and told everyone he was going to be my daddy come Saturday morning. Now, no one will ever make fun of me again.”

“Is that a fact?”

Charlotte nodded, crossing her hands across her waist. “Yes, sir, that is a fact.”

They all laughed.

It looked like Mr. Beadle and Jack had business to attend to. Marlene didn’t want to hold them up. “If you don’t mind Jack, we’ll be getting on home. Nice to meet you, Mr. Beadle.”

Jack spoke to his guest and followed Marlene and Charlotte home, giving them both a hug before hurrying back to where Mr. Beadle stood along the side of the street waiting. Marlene tried to picture what kind of business the man was in but didn’t have any idea.

Sooner or later, Jack would fill her in. She hoped. He asked her to trust him and she did.

Didn’t she?

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“A toast to the brides!”

“Here! Here!” The yard was filled with almost every woman in Mill Ridge and some of the ladies from Wichita Falls as well. It wasn’t often they had a bridal luncheon. Elizabeth and Annabelle knew everyone, it seemed. Marlene was surprised

she wasn't getting anxious with so many people there. Even the school children were here for the festivities.

Clarissa pushed her big body against the wooden fence loving all the attention. Charlotte was in her glory explaining the animal's story and how she got to live on the farm. Marlene was in heaven. This was a perfect end to a hectic week.

"Tomorrow we'll be married, Jennie."

Jennie closed her eyes. "I can't wait."

"Same here."

"Marlene, please stand up."

Marlene looked around. All eyes were on her. She didn't like being the center of attention.

"Come on now. We have your wedding dress ready for you."

Marlene was so nervous. She stood.

"Close your eyes."

She closed her eyes.

"No peeking," someone teased as they all laughed. Feet shuffled around until it there was a silence with some tiny oohs and ahhs filtered across the yard.

"Now open your eyes."

Marlene blinked at first, then blinked again. When her eyes steadied, she gasped. "It's beautiful," she whispered. Tears filled her eyes and she knew any moment they'd splash over onto her cheeks.

Someone handed her a handkerchief. "How did you know this is my favorite color?"

"We didn't but it seemed to fit you perfectly." Elizabeth Holloway pulled her shoulders back. "You both will be perfect brides tomorrow. We can't wait."

“Here! Here!” The crowd clapped and shouted again. Marlene never felt more loved than she did right then. Her life was almost too perfect, and while it was, she was going to eat this up. There had been too many dark and lonely days in her past.

“Thank you, everyone. I’m so grateful for each one of you.”

“Our pleasure. It’s what life in our small town is all about. We stick together here. You’ll always find a friend at any given time.”

“Here! Here!” Marlene said, raising her own glass in the air. A town filled with new friends and faces. Her sanctuary had now become her home.

All of these people were a part of her life now.

She smiled at Charlotte as the little girl waved to her. Marlene sighed. Tomorrow she’d be Mrs. Jack Fergenson. Wife of a well, she didn’t even know what he did for a living. He promised to tell her. Tonight was his last chance to see her before the wedding.

Should she worry?

Was he going to tell her or ask her to trust him again?

It seemed strange his boss would travel so far to see him married. Was there something more to this than meets the eye?

What if he was doing something illegal or horrible to hurt others? Why did she even think that way? He was such a nice man. Maybe he was worried no one would like him if he disclosed his job. With the appearance of his boss here, she hoped he would explain things.

Later that afternoon when they got home, her mind was nearing exhaustion from wondering about the wedding tomorrow, Jack’s work and his obligation to tell her. She tried

to close her eyes several times but it seemed impossible to rest. Her mind didn't want to stop the questions.

Instead, she gazed at the beautiful wedding gown hanging from a hook on the wall. The ladies all worked on it to her surprise. It turned out so beautiful she wondered if she was deserving of such a dress. It was a lavender gown that would hug her shoulders with white chiffon and a train of soft tulle that fell from the waist to flare out behind. She was so anxious and yet terrified at the same time.

Was this what it was like for all brides? Maybe Jennie had been right to want a small, no-nonsense wedding. Except Elizabeth and Annabelle gave her a good talking to and changed Jennie's mind. The whole town was officially invited to the wedding tomorrow.

Marlene felt herself starting to get anxious. Even though she had no reason to, she didn't know if she deserved so much happiness all in one shot.

The sound of someone knocking on the door distracted her distracting thoughts. Marlene hurried to answer to find Jack standing there, a small bunch of daisies in his hand. He held them out to her.

She motioned for Jack to come inside while she placed the flowers in a vase with water. She motioned for him to keep quiet since Charlotte had fallen asleep after all the festivities. "Let's go outside on the porch," she whispered after setting the vase on the table. "I'll get us something to drink."

Jack nodded and waited while she made some warm tea for the two of them. She wasn't even sure if he liked tea. What did she really know about her husband-to-be? Taking a deep breath, Marlene realized they had quite a bit of talking to do this evening before they were married tomorrow.

He must feel the same way, she thought. When she sat on the porch, he moved to the rocking chair instead of sitting on the bench beside her. Why was that? she wondered.

"Jack, why are you sitting so far away?"

He didn't look at her. "I have to disclose some things, Marlene. It's easier from here."

"Will I be upset with you?"

"I hope not."

"Then, come sit with me on the bench. I want to hold your hand while you tell me this news."

Jack tilted his head and looked at her as if seeing her for the first time. He stood, moved to the bench and held out his hand. A shudder went through him. She felt it. Was this bad news?

He turned to look at her, his hazel eyes intense. "Marlene, I'm sorry if I never disclosed my line of work to you before. I've kept it to myself to keep you safe."

She frowned. "Safe? Whatever do you mean, Jack?"

"I am a writer of dime novels."

It occurred to her the dime novel she had held in her hand that day was his work. That was why he had looked so dismayed. He had been afraid she found out. "The author's name was J. Fergy?"

He nodded. "I write under a nom de plume. I'll admit when I saw you holding the book, it scared the daylights out of me. The memory in my head was so dark and horrible I backed away from you that night. I want to apologize."

"No need." She squeezed his hand, although he was clinging to her own with a firm grip. "Why hide it, Jack? I assume Mr. Beadle is your publisher then?"

"He is." Jack ran his other hand through his hair, taking in

a huge breath of air. “I’ve become quite a famous writer of dime novels by the pseudonym of J. Fergy. I did some signings and public affairs in the city and met some of my biggest fans. There was one, a woman who would not stop pestering me. She even found out my real name and where I lived and came calling. I had to send her away several times. There was an incident in public where the police had to be called over. She was getting a crazed look in her eyes, which was not normal. My fans were relentless adventurers, even young boys and teens who loved the call of the west in my work. She was unusual and a threat.”

“How terrible. I can’t imagine being so famous!” Marlene was starting to realize Jack had gone through his own trauma.

“It gets much worse.” He hung his head and stared at the ground for a few moments. He seemed to have trouble with his next words. “I had gone to a book signing with my editor that afternoon. When I returned home, my front door was ajar. My sister Janey had come for a visit. She loved to see the city lights and shows. She had not been feeling well. When I went inside she had been murdered. Stabbed to death by the woman who had been stalking my career.” Jack let out a guttural sob, a giant, raspy sob that made his whole body shudder.

Marlene stood up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. “I’m so sorry, Jack.”

He stayed in her embrace until he got his voice back. “Janey was sixteen years old. She was in my care and I failed her. My parents blamed me, you know. They haven’t spoken one word to me since I had to tell them what happened.”

“It wasn’t your fault. The woman was demented.”

“She was. They sent her to Blackwell’s Island, a lunatic

asylum. My work as a writer almost came to a standstill after the trial until my boss told me to put that anger in my books. So I did and they even got more popular. I hated the big city by then and wanted to get away. When a friend of mine told me about his uncle's demise here in Mill Ridge, I bought the house by proxy and left the city for good."

"You mean to tell me you didn't even know where you were heading to?"

He shook his head. "I had no clue except it was a small town without a railroad. They claimed it was growing bigger but it sounded like heaven to me. My boss agreed to send him a manuscript each Friday so it didn't interrupt my work schedule."

"It was nice of him to come to your wedding."

"He came because I wrote to him about killing off J. Fergy."

"What? Stop writing?"

"No, that's not my intention. I'll always write. It's in my blood. I don't know what else to do with my life if I didn't write. I vowed never to put anyone else in direct harm. It's why I hesitated asking you to be my wife at first. If anything happened to you or Charlotte from one of my fans, it would truly be my end."

Marlene placed a kiss on his mouth. He clung to her, clearly distressed but when he kissed her back with all of his emotions, it was almost too much for Marlene. She pulled away, taking his face in her hands. "Jack. Nothing will happen to us. You're known here as Jack Fergenson. No one will ever know who you are."

"That crazy woman in New York followed me and found out who I was. I was hoping to start over here, it's why I didn't disclose my work to anyone in this town. I'll never do any

book signings or gatherings again. Do you realize if anyone learns where I live, anything can happen. I can't lose anyone else I love."

Marlene held him for the longest time. "Jack, what will you do now as far as a writing career if you kill off your non de plume?"

"I'll write under another name. My boss is working on that right now. He is going to announce the death of J. Fergy before the day is over via telegram. It will get to the front pages of all the newspapers immediately. By the time we marry tomorrow, my fictitious name is dead and you will stay safe. It's all I wanted and I'm sorry I waited this long to talk to you. I had to make sure it was guaranteed you would always be safe first. I can't lose you, Marlene."

"Oh, Jack!" Their lips came together in a sweet kiss, so sincere it almost made Marlene cry.

"I have to ask you to keep what you heard tonight to yourself, Marlene. I can't risk it getting out."

"There are people who are suspicious of what you do, Jack. We have to give people something. Perhaps you can introduce your boss. Plus, everyone knows you send a package each Friday and they are curious."

"I thought about telling your brother. He gives me a steady look every time we are alone in the same room. I know he wants to ask me but has not yet. I'm not sure what I'll tell him."

"The truth, Jack. You can trust my brother."

"I'm afraid to. Truly, I am."

"I promise to say nothing to anyone right now. But, sooner or later, I will feel inclined to explain to my brother. I need you to try to trust more people. Not everyone is crazed. There

are people here who love you. Look at me. I thought I was alone in the world. Now I have so many people who love me I can't take it all in."

Jack sighed. "In time, perhaps."

Marlene hadn't noticed the dark figure until she looked up to see her brother standing there.

Mack Everett frowned. "No need to explain things to me, Jack. I already know."

Jack's head whipped around. He stood. "How?"

"I have my ways."

"He was a Pinkerton, Jack. He always gets to the bottom of things. He isn't going to let me marry someone of ill repute. I told him you weren't, but he had to find out for himself."

Mack leaned against the rail, close to where Jack stood on the porch. "Jack, I'm a bit disappointed that you didn't discuss this with the sheriff when you first came to town. It not only put my sister in danger, but the whole town as well."

Jack gritted his teeth. "I know. I had heard Mill Ridge was a place where no one cared about your past. I didn't think it mattered until I met Marlene. I've taken steps to keep her safe."

"You swear?"

"Yes. J. Fergy, well-known dime novelist will be dead by morning."

"Good idea. I suppose you'll keep writing?"

"Yes, under a new name."

"Make sure to tell me what that name will be."

"Why's that, Mack?"

Mack smiled and came up on the porch. He turned before going inside. "I enjoy those dime novels, Jack. I want to see what happens next."

Marlene nudged Jack and gave him a big smile. “See, I told you he won’t care. Now, he’ll make sure no one ever bothers you again. It’s best to let the sheriff know, too. Perhaps you can talk to him after the wedding tomorrow.”

Mack shook his head. “No can do.”

“Why not?”

“I’ll be spending the whole day with my new wife. She gets all my attention tomorrow.”

“What about your boss? He is here to visit.”

“He will be heading out the moment the wedding is over. He spends months at a time at a retreat in Colorado. He sneezes and coughs a lot, it does his lungs good.”

“Annabelle is taking Charlotte with them to the farm tomorrow. We’ll have the whole evening and overnight to celebrate our wedding.”

“I know. I plan to celebrate with the woman I love.”

“Kiss me, Jack. Kiss me good.”

He didn’t hesitate this time.

Chapter 9

*T*ears rolled down her face as she walked towards her husband-to-be. The church was filled to capacity, with some residents standing. This double wedding had everyone wearing their Sunday best to attend. She doubted there was anyone left home alone today. The street outside the church was clogged with horse and buggy's from as far away as Wichita Falls. Everyone loved weddings and parties, it seemed.

Jennie walked beside her in a beautiful white gown. The two smiled at each other through the veil over their faces. "Sisters forever," Jennie whispered.

Marlene was too choked up to speak so she gave her a nod. They finished their walk down the aisle as everyone in church watched. There were so many sets of eyes on the brides, Marlene was afraid she'd start to shake. When she saw Jack standing there beside her brother, with the reverend behind them, she let out a sigh of relief. Taking this walk down the aisle was nothing compared to her last five years. Especially when a man like Jack was waiting to make her his wife.

She'd take this walk any day.

Jack leaned over and whispered in her ear. "You look beautiful."

"And you, dear Jack, look so handsome."

"May I have your attention please. Let's begin with this special chapter of Corinthians," the reverend said, his voice

rising above the rumble of soft voices still talking. Marlene didn't hear a word of what was said. She dared a peek at Jack, who stared at her, his intense eyes filled with adornment. She hoped to get through this day without a panic attack. Her heart was ready to burst wide open!

Twenty minutes later the good reverend announced them husband and wife, along with Mack and Jennie. The crowd cheered and clapped like nobody's business. She heard the buzzing in her ears but she had eyes only for her husband, who was moving towards her to seal the deal with a kiss.

"I love you, Marlene," he told her right before his mouth came down on hers in a breathless kiss that almost made her faint.

She stepped back when he released her. "My goodness gracious, husband! That was some kiss!"

"There's plenty more where that came from." He gave her a wink, turned to the crowd and smiled so wide she thought his face would crack apart. Instead of continuing to worry, Marlene gave in and raised her hand in the air, holding the bouquet of flowers over her head. She let her head fall back and looked up. *Thank you, my Lord. I've been through the darkest hour and now you've led me to the brightest light. I'm grateful for my blessings.*

"Hey, Mrs. Fergenson. You alright?"

She giggled. "Yes, Mr. Fergenson. I'm ready to go home."

He nodded. "I agree but we're not done yet. The townsfolk have tables lined up outside for a reception and a wedding cake. There's Charlotte. I think she wants to say goodbye."

Charlotte ran to her. Even though she was wearing a beautiful gown, Marlene reached down and scooped her daughter up in her arms. It didn't matter if her little shoes

clung to the gown when she wrapped her legs around Marlene's waist. They both had been down a long, tiring road to get to this point. She had tried to keep Charlotte's life as normal as possible, even when she was in her non-speaking mode. Even though kids made fun of her for not having a real daddy, at least now she'd have a loving home. And a real daddy.

"I'm going to stay at the farm tonight. Clarissa misses me. I'll see you tomorrow at church mommie. I love you." Marlene held her for the longest time until Charlotte wiggled to get free. She let her down and watched as her five year old jumped up to have Jack catch her in his arms. She flung her little arms around his neck. "I love you, daddy. I can call you daddy, now. You are married to my mommie."

"I love you too, Charlotte."

Marlene thought Jack was going to cry but he maintained his composure the whole time. After Charlotte left with the Jennings family, Jack turned to her. "I think I'm done for. That daughter of yours completely took me off guard."

She shook her head. "You haven't seen anything yet. Let's go socialize with the guests so we can go home." All week long they had moved what furniture she had to Jack's house. Jennie had done the same thing but she didn't have much except for a few suitcases of clothes and a special family book she placed on the mantle. When Charlotte came home on Sunday, she'd be going home to Jack's house. Their new house.

It was the start of a new life. One she was going to embrace.

Everyone was outside crowded around the table where the wedding cake sat on. Glasses were raised and they were just about to cut the cake when Mr. Beadle cried out. "Ack! Here

comes trouble."

Everyone in the crowd, including Jack and Marlene, looked at the buggy coming down the street, trying to park amongst the many there.

Jack spoke up first. "Who is that?"

"That's Frank Wetling. He's a dog-gone reporter trying to make himself famous. I'm afraid he must've followed me here, Jack. I've sent the telegram we talked about but if he sees you here, it won't matter much. He'll be able to dispute my words."

The crowd was listening. "We can run him off," one of the older citizens shouted before knowing why.

"No, can't do that, he'd become suspicious," Beadle replied.

Jack sighed. He held up his hands for quiet. "I'm going to be honest with all of you. Some of you wondered what I do for a living, well, I'll tell you. I write dime novels by the name of J. Fergy. Except as of today, we killed off the fictitious name J. Fergy. My boss here, Mr. Beadle just sent notice of J. Fergy's death. But this feller," he pointed to the man trying to park the buggy, " he is a reporter trying to find my identity. I'm sorry, folks, I had to keep quiet about my work. Now, I realize you are all my family and I should've told you in the first place."

"Darn tootin' we are and we ain't gonna let some young buck find out any of Mill Ridge's secrets. Let's all make a pack right now, folks. No one will ever know who this man is!"

"Here! Here!" One after another shouted out until everyone was calling out. Most of them didn't care, all they wanted was to make sure one of their own was protected.

Marlene saw the reporter find a spot to park his buggy. "Has he ever seen you before, Jack?"

“I’m not sure. If he poked around in the city, he may have an idea of what I look like.”

“We better get out of here, Jack. Here he comes.”

The crowd hid the newly married couple by forming a wall until they were able to sneak alongside the church and run down one of the side alleys. Marlene held on to Jack’s hand as he took the lead. “I hope Charlotte got away in time!”

“She did. I saw Grant get everyone in his wagon and they took off.”

“Good. I’d hate to be told on by my own child. She won’t understand, she’s too young.”

“Not going to happen. Here, turn up this way.” They ran through a few yards and were even chased by some stray chickens until they made it to Jack’s house. He held open the gate, closing it after her. He wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her up in his arms. She giggled like a young school girl.

Jack strolled up the walkway, taking the two steps to his porch and kicked open the front door. He grinned down at Marlene. “Welcome home, Mrs. Fergenson.”

And he took her over the threshold.

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Marlene stretched the next morning, realizing how wonderful it was to be alive and well. The sun shone bright through the upstairs window. She was truly a bride, for the second time. Yet, it felt like the first time. Her first husband never treated her like a precious jewel, carefully considering her feelings in every aspect of their time together.

She grinned.

“Come join me,” her husband told her.

She peeked out from under the covers to find him sitting by a large window. There was a small table where two cups of coffee sat. She wrapped the sheet around her and moved to the chair he had pulled out for her. “This is a nice view. You can practically see the whole main street from here.”

He kissed her gently on the mouth. “I’ve been quite entertained this morning. Usually the streets are still on a Sunday morning except for a few people here and there. Not today. Can’t say I know what’s going on.”

A tapping at the front door caused Marlene to jump up. “I better get dressed.”

He shook his head. “I forbid it, my lady.”

Marlene’s eyes widened. “You can’t forbid me to get dressed!”

“I am your husband and I say no.” He nuzzled her neck and made her giggle. “I’ll be right back as soon as I get rid of this intruder. We have much work to do.”

She laughed to herself when he left in his bare feet. Whoever was intruding must not be aware of their wedding yesterday. The whole town had been there and knew about it. Her thoughts went to her daughter. Right away, she thought about Charlotte. What if something happened?

She was about to run to the top of the stairs to listen when she heard her brother’s voice. With a sigh of relief, Marlene went back inside the room until Jack returned. If something happened, Mack would’ve already called out to her. She had no doubt.

When Jack returned he had a devil-may-care look on his face.

“What is it?” She waited until he sat back down and slid on

his lap.

He wrapped both arms around her waist and pulled her close. “Seems the town of Mill Ridge is going to be in mourning today.”

“Oh? What happened?”

“The town is holding a public funeral for the famous writer J. Fergy. Can you believe it?”

“Are you serious?” Marlene didn’t know whether to laugh or frown. “Why is this a good thing?”

“Your brother stopped by to tell me that last night after we snuck out of the reception, this reporter began to ask everyone questions about J. Fergy. Everyone was answering the best they can and then someone from the crowd shouted out that we were having the funeral this morning. The man was going to leave, go back to Wichita Falls and hook up on the next train. That loud mouth ruined things. Even so, the town is pulling together to convince him Fergy is dead. We’re burying him today at eleven in the morning.”

Marlene began to laugh. “Can we go?”

“To the funeral?”

“Yes. You can’t go as yourself, but I have an idea. Even though he doesn’t know what you look like for certain, I’m sure if he snooped around in New York City, someone had to give him a description of you.”

Jack shook his head. “He’d pick me right out of the crowd then.”

Marlene stood, the sheet falling to the floor. “Not if you’re incognito.”

“How am I supposed to think, Marlene. You’ve absolutely distracted me again.”

She walked towards her husband. “Don’t think, Jack. We’ve

got some time before the funeral."

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After Grant Jennings heard what was going on, they decided to skip church and keep Charlotte at the farm. He rode into town to let them know. Jack's farm house was quite busy that morning, with men coming and going. It was good the boarding house where the reporter stayed last night wasn't within distance. Still, Jack hoped the commotion didn't draw too much attention.

Along with Grant and a few other men who had stopped by, they explained the plans that were being made to drive an empty coffin through town while the townsfolk followed behind to the graveyard.

"Jack, we have to go to your funeral," Marlene told him. Her words sounded quite ridiculous. "They said to meet at the church at eleven."

"It's pretty dangerous to do so. He may recognize me."

Marlene laughed, a sly smile covering her face. Jack wasn't sure what she had planned. "He will never recognize you, Aunt Josephine."

Grant, Noah, Sheriff Nightingale and a few other men roared with laughter.

"Over my dead body! I ain't dressing up like no woman!"

"Come on, don't be a spoiled sport! Why hide here and miss all the action."

"I ain't putting on a dress. No way!" Jack didn't mind being teased but his wife was having way too much fun with this. He did enjoy watching her smile and laugh. Marlene had finally come out of her shell. He'd like to think he had something to do with the end results.

“I’m teasing, Jack! I have something else in mind. The man who sold you this house left a trunk full of clothing. I noticed it before. Why don’t we take a look and you can be Uncle Joe instead?”

“That’s better. Ok, I’m all for having a bit of fun.” He turned to the men, who tried to hide their smirks. “This won’t ever be mentioned outside of this house.”

The men mumbled how they’d never tell a soul but when they left, their laughter resonated up his walkway and back in the house. Jack rubbed his chin. He’d probably never hear the end of his wife wanting to dress him up like some old woman!

“Come along, Jack. We have some work to do.”

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“Shh. You have to lower your voice. Make it sound old and tired.”

“I’m not old and tired. This is insane. I’m going home.”

Marlene nudged him with her elbow. Then she raised her voice. “Now, now, Uncle Joe. I know you loved him. Please, stop crying.”

“I’m not crying,” he told her, frustrated. She thought this was so funny. Well, he had to admit, his wife was quite the kidder.

Jack wore a pair of black brushed cotton trousers, along with a white dress shirt with a high collar and a pure black silk puff tie. His hands were covered with a pair of black deerskin dress gloves and he wore a striped Galloway vest over the shirt. To top off his fancy wear, he hung a black rifle frock coat over his shoulders. He leaned in, whispering in Marlene’s ear. “This flour is starting to get itchy. I want to take this hat off and scratch my head.”

“You can’t. Be brave, Jack. Aren’t you having fun?”

He grinned. “Maybe a little.” He had to admit, it took them longer than they had planned to get ready for the service. Marlene had decided to put flour in his hair to give him an aged, greying look. He got a bright idea of doing the same to her and they wound up with a ton of flour on the floor and all over them. That’s when Marlene decided to pretend she was his wife instead of his daughter. They both had greying hair and she wore dark stockings with a black dress, hiding her hair under a hat with netting. No one was able to see she was so young. She had even found a pair of black gloves to match her own outfit.

The two of them made quite the handsome couple. They walked out of the church, Jack leaning heavily on a cane while Marlene held onto him with a stooped back. They got in line behind the others and noticed the reporter was one row ahead of them, taking notes as he walked. He pushed his glasses up his nose several times when they almost fell off.

As the procession began, music from a guitar and fiddle rent the air. Jack stretched his neck to see a red-headed cowboy leading the way, playing a slow ballad on his fiddle while the young man beside him strummed a slow tune on his guitar.

Someone yelled out, “Rusty, that old coot still plays the fiddle like nobody’s business.”

The crowd murmured until several of the ladies tried to shush everyone.

“This is a funeral, folks, keep it down in front,” the reverend stated.

Jack whispered in Marlene’s ear. “Watch that reporter as he is sticking his neck out to see what’s going on. Notice Sam Smith from the livery moves right in front of him so he can’t

see."

"So does Dr. Hart and his wife. They are walking along side of him. Every time he moves to look, the doctor gets in his way."

Jack grinned. Everyone sure was going out of their way to make sure J. Fergy did rest in peace. Even Mr. Beadle was here, walking in the front of the crowd. He hung his head as if he lost his best friend. He walked with the Young and White families, who all showed up after getting word from one of their cow hands who had been in town for the wedding what happened. They lived twenty minutes away and made a point of being here to support Jack today. He shook his head. These people were truly amazing.

Jack lifted his head and prayed to God above this would work. Once J. Fergy was laid to rest, he'd start over, closing the door to the past and begin a new phase of his writing career.

The voices of many of the townsfolk blended in harmony as they belted out;

Shall we meet beyond the river,
In the clime where angels dwell?
Shall we meet where friendship never
Saddest tales of sorrow tell?
Shall we meet our loved companions,
On that brighter, fairer shore,
When this life's great work is ended,
Shall we meet to part no more?
Yes, we'll meet beyond the river,
Where our joys shall never die,
We shall meet our loved and saved ones,

In that happy by and by.

Jack clasped Marlene's hand and stood with the crowd as they lowered J. Fergy's coffin in the ground. "I almost feel as if I'm saying goodbye to a friend," Jack told her.

She held on tighter. "You are."

Perhaps she was right. It was time to lay the name to rest. I had brought him great joy when he was building a career and made him tons of money. It also caused him so much grief, losing his sister, his parents love. J. Fergy almost caused him to become a broken man. Until he met Marlene.

Today was a new start. A future. A second chance.

Chapter 10

3 months later

*C*harlotte squirmed. “Now, hold still, child. I’m not going to hurt you!” Frustrated, Marlene tried to finish the child’s hair. “All done. I see Uncle Mack coming up the walk.”

“Goodbye Mommie! Daddy!” She gave each parent a hug and kiss and ran out the door with her lunch pail.

“He still comes for her, every morning like clockwork,” Jack mumbled. He was opening a package that had arrived this morning.

Marlene refilled their coffee and sat down at the table with him. “Mack enjoys picking her up and taking her to school. Besides, he says he has to check on his wife, make sure she is feeling well.”

Jack grinned. “I see him over at the school more than at the sheriff’s office. For a deputy, he sure doesn’t go by the rules.”

Marlene laughed. “I doubt Sheriff Nightingale is worried. He’s happy to have Mack working with him. Besides, Mack doesn’t have to work. The reward money he received for finding those railroad certificates is more than enough where they can live in comfort. Mack’s problem is he can’t be idle.”

“Seems like they have been pretty busy from the announcement they made last week. It’s only been three months since the wedding.”

Marlene shook her head. “Oh, Jack. It doesn’t take long to conceive a baby.”

Jack agreed. “I guess you’re right. We need to work on that some more.”

Marlene smiled. “We have been, husband. Every day and night.”

He gave her a cheeky grin. “Don’t hurt to try some more.”

“Husband, you are too frisky.”

He leaned over the table to kiss her. “You make me that way.”

She kissed him back and pointed to the package. “What do you have there?”

“My new life.”

Marlene set her cup down. “May I see, please?”

“For a kiss.”

“How about two, one now and one before you start working?”

“Deal.” He handed the book to her.

Marlene ran her fingers over the yellow-toned cover. The words stood out in bold black ink. “*Tales in a Texas Town or The Mysterious Adventures of Charlie and Clarissa.*” The cover had a photo of a cow that looked pretty close to Clarissa and a young boy. She looked at her husband with a new respect.

“What do you think?”

“I think it’s wonderful.”

“I wanted to add Charlotte’s name but my publisher insisted the hero had to be a boy, hence, Charlie, since mostly young boys will read this. Somehow I’m going to write Charlotte into a scene or two. Maybe she will be the annoying but sweet little sister.”

She noticed right away his legal name as that of the writer.

Surprised, she looked at her husband. “You did not use a fictitious name.”

He shook his head then looked at her. Jack crossed his arms over his chest. “When Beadle was here he told me that when they investigated the murder they found out my sister had been communicating with the stalker’s brother. It had more to do with her than me. This woman knew she was there and broke in. I guess my fame made it easier to find my sister. She saw my sister as a threat somehow in her deranged mind. It wasn’t just because of my books. There was more to it than they told us because they wanted to spare my parents.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. You’ve carried the burden of her death for so long.”

“I still feel responsible. Because I did book signings as J. Fergy and was in the public eye more so than not, it wasn’t hard to follow me home and find out where I lived.”

She got up and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, standing behind him. “You must stop blaming yourself. It’s not your fault.”

“I’m learning, Marlene. Only time will heal these feelings. It’s why I decided I’m not hiding my name any longer. In order to move on I’m declaring Jack Fergenson is the proud author of these new dime novels. I’m also going to be writing a story once a month for the Wichita Falls newspaper.”

Marlene hugged him. “Good for you. The whole town will be proud to know you.”

“As long as there are no crazed fans.”

“Or, a nosey newspaper reporter. That one sure left town in a hurry the other week after J. Fergy’s funeral.”

Jack laughed. “Well, he was asking questions even after the funeral so he could do a write up on the last days of J. Fergy’s

life. The sheriff was getting tired of him and noticed that busybody Miss Steele from the Teacher's Association was back in town. So, he sicked her on him. In a matter of less than an hour, the reporter left, the dust from his buggy clouding the streets."

Marlene got a good laugh at that story. "I'm sure he got all he needed from her. I hope she doesn't bother Jennie too much. That woman is a shrew! She won't stop harassing poor Jennie."

"I think Jennie can handle her. As a matter of fact, I'm starting to wander if Miss Steele comes back for the teacher at all. I've seen her eyeing up one of our townsfolk."

"Oh? Mister Fergenson, what in the world are you watching Miss Steele for?"

"Now, darling, this was before you and I were together. I observe people, it's what I do as a writer."

"Hmm, that sounds a bit fishy to me." She loved teasing her husband. "If you know so much, who is she eyeing up?"

Jack stood up and threw the book on the table. He picked his wife up and began to carry her upstairs. "You will have to force it out of me, Mrs. Fergenson."

Marlene giggled and held on. "I certainly will, sir."

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A week later Charlotte had just left for school with Mack when a buggy stopped in front of the boarding house. Marlene was on her way to see Doc Hart when she noticed an older couple disembark. They looked around as if lost.

The woman was tiny but she wore a black dress and veil. It was hard to see her face. Marlene gasped when the man turned to stare at her. He was an older version of Jack, his

hair gray, almost white. She knew right away it was Jack's parents, he had the same hazel eyes as his son. She wanted to rush home and tell him but wanted to make sure it was them. "Hello, may I help you find someone?"

"We are looking for the grave site of J. Fergy. Can you direct us to the cemetery?"

Marlene wanted to tell them their son was not dead. She had to make sure. "Are you friends of the great writer?"

"No. We're family. Now, can you tell us where we may find it?"

"Yes, sir. Straight out of town and bear to the right. You'll see it over the small hump. "

"Thank you, miss." The woman nodded and allowed her husband to help her back in the buggy.

Marlene watched as they made their way to the edge of town. She lifted her skirts and flew down the road towards home. Flinging the gate open, she ran up the two steps, calling for Jack. "Hurry, Jack, come down here!"

"What is it?"

She didn't mean to put the ferocious look on his face when he raced down from the upstairs.

"You have some visitors!" She was trying to speak while catching her breath.

"Where? I don't see anyone." Jack peeked out the door, then turned back to look at her leaning against the wall.

"Not here, Jack. Oh my! It's your parents."

Jack stilled. "What!"

"They asked for directions to the cemetery."

"They think I'm dead. Dear Lord, I didn't send them a letter telling them what we did, although I didn't think it was necessary since they haven't spoken to me since my sister's

death."

Marlene had a hold of herself. She pushed from the wall. "We've been too busy to realize they knew your pen name. I'm so sorry, Jack. Go on, go make things right."

Jack hesitated. He tried to hide a flash of anger that crossed his face. She reached up to hold his cheeks in her hands. "Forgiveness will set you free, Jack. You may have hard feelings about what happened. I'm sure you are hurt but not forgiving them will break your heart, Jack. You can't be a good parent unless you treat your own well."

Jack hung his head. "How did you know I was feeling spiteful? My first thought was to let them believe I'm dead, too. When my sister died, they refused to speak to me. I was hurting, blaming myself and it didn't help they blamed me as well."

"Time heals."

"You know it better than anyone, Marlene. It's why I love you."

She gave him a sweet kiss and pushed him out the door. "No, go on. You know what to do."

She watched him hurry through town, his long strides taking him towards the edge of town where the cemetery and his parents were. Then he stopped, turned and began racing through the street as fast as he could. Marlene went outside, down the walk and began to walk towards him. What in the world?

When he reached her, he bent over, hands on his knees, breathing erratically. Once he caught his breath he took hold of her shoulders and gave her a long, deep kiss in the middle of the street. Shocked, she looked at him with eyes wide. "Jack, what in the world?"

“It hit me as I’m walking along to the cemetery, Marlene. You said I can’t be a good parent unless I treat mine well. Does that mean what I think it does?”

She nodded, not realizing she had said those words earlier. “I wanted to confirm it with Doc Hart first before I told you for sure.”

“Is that where you were going this morning?”

“Sure was and I am late so I’ve got to go, Jack. Go on, now.”

“I’ll drop you off.”

“If you insist.” She ran inside to get her reticule. Her husband stood in the middle of the street, patiently waiting on her. When she met up with him, he wrapped an arm around her and delivered her to the doctor’s office.

“I’ll be back shortly. I don’t want you to leave here until I can walk you home.”

“Jack, that’s overbearing. I can walk home myself.”

He shook his head. “It’s too dangerous.”

Marlene placed a hand on her hip. “Dangerous? Jack, that’s ridiculous!”

“Please, Marlene. I have to deal with my parents right now. I’d feel better if you waited for me.”

“Why didn’t you say so. I’ll be inside or on the bench outside if there is room,” she told him. “Now get moving. You’ve stalled enough.”

He took off down the street while she went to her appointment. After the doc confirmed she was indeed with child, Marlene let the tears run across her cheeks unchecked. When she left the office, the bench outside was filled with other patients so Marlene made her way down the street towards the edge of town. She was filled with so much joy she didn’t think to wait there.

All she wanted was to tell Jack and have him hold her in his arms. Hurrying past the saloon, she crossed the street at the edge of town. The buggy had stopped at the cemetery and the three of them stood there, looking down at the grave.

Then Jack's mother turned and took her son in her arms and Jack's father followed. Marlene felt like an intruder until Jack looked up to see her standing there. He motioned for her to come closer. "This is my wife."

Jack's father grinned. "We've already met, I believe," he said before putting an arm out to include her in their circle of hugs.

Mrs. Fergenson took her hand. "Welcome to our family."

"Thank you. Why don't we go to the house and have something to eat. I'm sure you must be starved by now."

"How about if we treat the both of you to lunch at the small restaurant we noticed as we came through town."

"How about the three of us?" Marlene heard Jack's intake of breath.

"Marlene," he said, his raspy voice close to her ear. "Are we? Is it?"

She nodded. "For sure, Jack. Congratulations, you are going to be a father."

He wrapped his arms around her and gave her a kiss so sweet Marlene wanted to cry.

A cough interrupted the two.

Jack moved away. "I'm sorry, Mother, I got carried away. But you'll be happy to know you are going to be a grandmother!"

A tear fell from his mother's cheek. Mr. Fergenson took his handkerchief and wiped it away. "Come along, everyone. Now we have something else to celebrate." After dropping the

buggy at the livery, they walked to the restaurant together.

Boy what a celebration. Before they were finished with their meal, the rest of the patrons found out about the baby because Jack told every soul who entered through the front door. His dad thought Jack was going overboard but Jack didn't care. He wanted to shout it to the world.

"Father, will you stay awhile? We have plenty of room for the both of you?"

"A week at the most, son. I have a big case coming up in a few weeks."

"My father is one of the best district attorney's on the east coast, Marlene. He's helped to put away some bad people."

"I'm impressed, sir. Then you will be a fine grandfather. We'll tell stories of your mighty deeds."

His father grinned.

His mother rolled her eyes.

Jack had a smile on his face a mile wide.

Marlene sighed. Then she realized the whole town knew about her baby except for her own baby. Charlotte! "Oh, dear! Jack, I haven't told Charlotte about the baby. I don't want her to hear it from anyone else."

Jack stood. "We have to go."

Jack's parents followed them across the street to the school house. Marlene went inside while they all waited in the yard. She told Jennie what happened so the child was able to leave. Pretty soon, she had a curious Charlotte running down the steps and jumping into Jack's arms.

"Hello, princess. I have some wonderful news."

Charlotte placed her little hands on his cheeks and looked him right in the eye. "You do?"

"Yes, I want you to meet your grandparents."

“I have grandparents? Mommie, what are grandparents?”

Before Marlene was able to answer, she slid down from Jack and stood in front of his mother. “Hello, are you my grandparents?”

Mrs. Fergenson, who had pulled back her veil since she really wasn’t mourning anyone any longer, smiled. She held out a gloved hand. “Yes. How do you do?”

Charlotte took her hand and shook it. “I’m Charlotte. Do you want to go to the farm on Saturday to see Clarissa? She’s my cow. I have friends there, too. You can come with if you promise to eat all your vegetables.”

Jack’s mother laughed along with the others. “I believe we can arrange to tag along with you. We are going to stay for a week.”

Charlotte’s eyes got huge. “A whole week!” She turned to Marlene. “Mommie, can I stay home from school to spend time with my new grandparents?”

“I think we’ll take today off but you have to go to school tomorrow.” Before Charlotte began to whine, she added, “ How about we talk about it later? I have some other good news to tell you about when we get home.”

“Okay.”

Charlotte looked up at her new grandparents and took each of their hands as they all walked back home.

Jack and Marlene followed behind, their arms around each other.

“I love you, Marlene.”

“Oh, Jack. I love you more.”

He shook his head. “There’s no way. You can’t possibly love me more than what I’m feeling right now, this very moment.”

“Oh, I bet I can show you,” she teased.

He nuzzled her ear. “Come to think of it, I bet you can.”

“That’s right, Jack. Don’t you ever forget it.”

“I never will, my darling.”

Marlene looked up to see her brother watching from the sheriff’s front porch. She waved to him, then looked up to the sky, thanking God he found her that day.

She’d come a long way since then, thanks to Jack Fergenson and a cow named Clarissa.

Thanks for reading Jack and Marlene’s story. I wonder who Miss Steele was paying attention to in Mill Ridge? She’s been a miserable pain in the side to Miss Jennie, the school teacher, trying to oust her from her job. Her position in the Teacher’s Association makes her hated by most. Why in the world would anyone take an interest in her?

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A Bride for Luke

Prologue 1870's

Nora White stood in front of the boarding house on Main Street in Wichita Falls ready to make a deal with the devil. Well, perhaps not the devil. She heard many great things about the matchmaker Miss Addie. She wouldn't be here if she had heard any different. It didn't help her nerves were all over the place.

"Only the best for my sons," she whispered. Her voice caught the wind as a man walked by, tipping the rim of his hat in greeting. "Good day to you, ma'am."

Nora tucked back strands of dark lustrous hair peppered with gray. If there was one thing her husband always said it was she had a great head of hair. A slight smile curved her lips at the nostalgic thought. She still missed Robert so much. He had always taken the time after a long day to place a hand over her cheek and tell her how beautiful she was. He had done it every single day no matter how exhausted he was after a hard day's work on the ranch they owned.

Enough day dreaming, it never got her anywhere. Squaring her shoulders, she stood in front of the big door and lifted a hand to knock.

Before she made contact, the door swung open. A beautiful

woman stood there, one of advancing age but well groomed with dark hair and wearing a lovely, expensive gown. “Welcome to Wichita Falls, Mrs. White. Please, do come in.”

She held the door open while Nora contemplated spinning around and walking away.

It wouldn’t get her sons a good wife if she did so.

Miss Addie led her to the dining room table, offering her a seat while picking up a tray from the side board. “Let’s have some tea,” she offered, setting a cup in front of Nora.

“Thank you, Miss Addie. I’ll get straight to the point. I hear you are the best match-maker in the whole of Texas and beyond. Is this true? I want only the best for my boys.”

Miss Addie smiled. “I suppose you are referring to my one hundred percent success rate? You’ve come to the right place, my dear. Now, what is it you want me to do for you?”

Nora sighed. This Miss Addie was certainly sure of herself. When the decision came upon her to find her sons good Christian women, the others in church told her of Miss Addie’s success. She had immediately sent a letter not expecting a reply so fast. Within two weeks, the woman had replied with an appointment to come see her. Two hours later, she found herself smack dab in the middle of the Main Street of Wichita Falls. “I’ve heard this town is mostly filled with mail-order brides that you are responsible for?”

“You heard correctly. I’ve chosen the best grooms for the lovely ladies and the most suitable women. This is my life, Miss White. I don’t mess around or truffle with tender feelings. You may expect the best, top-notch service from me.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, tell me about you?”

“Me? Why me? I have no interest in a man? I want this for

my three sons."

Miss Addie leaned forward, setting her tea cup on the saucer with a delicate hand. "Miss White, in order for me to find your sons a good, Christian wife, which is what I believe you said, I'll need to know all about the woman who raised them. Fair enough?"

Nora nodded. "I suppose." She didn't like to get personal with others but this was for a good reason. Her sons were her world, her life.

"Tell me about you, Miss White."

"First of all, please, call me Nora. I've been a widow for ten long years now. The boys lost their father and I lost a good, hard-working husband when rustlers tried to steal some of our cattle. He was wounded by one of them and never recovered."

Miss Addie steepled her hands. "I'm sorry for your loss. What is it that brought you to me, Nora?"

"I'm getting older. From the day my husband died, the boys have taken over the ranch. When I tell one of them to go find a nice, sweet Christian woman, they shrug it off, determined to be there for me. I'm not going to be here forever, Miss Addie. I want them each to have a full life with a wonderful woman and not take care of an old lady, but they won't try to find their own happy life."

"You are hardly old, Nora. Why, there are plenty of eligible men who would agree with me."

A blush spread across her cheeks. It had been a long, long time since someone said such a nice thing. "I'm obliged to your kindness, but it's my sons I'm concerned about. Can you help them?"

The noise of a teacup being set on its plate was the only sound in the room right before Miss Addie pushed her chair

back. “Of course, I can help. Now, let’s take a walk to the porch out front while you tell me who is going to be the first to marry.”

Standing on the porch, Nora felt so relieved. Instinct told her she must trust Miss Addie to find the best wife for her oldest son. He was the one she worried about the most. “May as well start with Luke, my oldest. He’s been taking care of everyone and everything since Robert’s death. Luke is quiet, yet dignified and he is angry.”

“Angry? Will this be a potential problem for a bride?”

Nora shook her head. “No, I don’t mean he is mean or would hurt anyone. He is so serious all the time. In my heart I’m sure he is angry at his father for leaving us and yet Robert had no control of fate. But he will take care of his bride like he has taken care of the ranch and his brothers. He gives his heart and soul to those he loves. He has a fierce loyalty to all of us.”

Miss Addie nodded. “Perhaps he needs a bride who will be willing to show him some kindness. Let me think on this. I’ll be in touch.”

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A week and a half later a letter arrived. Nora slipped off to her bedroom to read what Miss Addie sent:

Dear Nora,

I do believe I’ve found the perfect bride for your son, Luke. She has a situation and needs to leave her home town immediately, thus, this letter of urgency sent to you today. It isn’t drastic but a choice of hers where she does not wish to marry an ageing friend of the family. I have further investigated and am reassured Miss Abigail Wheatland is all she claims to be.

I've sent her the details and a ticket to arrive in two weeks time. Therefore, you will have the same amount of time to inform your son of his impending marriage. Enclosed, please find a photo of Miss Abigail Wheatland and some other facts about the nuptials. I would have liked to meet your son and spend time with him, which is what I normally do in cases like this. However, since you and I have already met, I've determined you are an honest and upstanding citizen so the need to meet with your son will not take place.

Please inform him of the details of our conversation. Miss Wheatland will arrive expecting to be married immediately. I will expect him to be at the Wichita Falls train station on the sixth of September to fetch her and bring her to the church for the official ceremony.

Yours truly,

Miss Addie

Nora stared at the letter. She thought there would be more time to prepare her son of the upcoming ceremony. Now, she'd have to do it and soon.

Yet, a week and a half later, she was still contemplating what to do. Nora saddled one of the horses. She needed to think. Riding was always her way to explore the vast land her husband had purchased so long ago. The green hills, valleys and pastures where their cattle grazed made her feel so alive, as if there were no cares in the world. Nora may be ageing but with years in the saddle, she could ride like nobody's business.

Hours later, after refreshing herself with a long jaunt, she slid from the mare, walked her and brushed Fancy Lady down. She smiled at the name for the honey-colored horse. Whenever the mare left the barn, she'd walk as if she was the fanciest girl in town, lifting her tail up in the air along with perking

her ears and raising her front feet higher than normal. It always made Nora laugh.

"Glad to see you're smiling," her oldest remarked. He came around the side of the large barn, his tall form intimidating to many except for his mama.

She gave him a look of consternation. "What's that supposed to mean, young man?"

Luke sighed. "Young man? I'm barely young, Mama. Twenty-seven is not young."

Nora grinned. "You are still the most handsome of the boys, you know that, right?"

He rolled his eyes. "Yes, and the most fun, the most original, the best at wrangling cattle and your favorite. You say it to each one of us. At any time any one of us can suddenly become the favorite."

Nora laughed out loud. "You boys are on to me!"

He actually smiled, showing a set of white teeth. "We've known all along."

Nora's way was teasing all three of her boys so they always thought they were the most important. Yet, each one knew how much they were loved in their own right. Her boys were her life but she didn't want them to make her theirs.

They all needed a bride.

It was now or never.

She led Fancy Lady to the coral to graze. After returning to the barn where Luke was brushing down his own horse, she placed a hand over his. "We must talk."

Luke raised an eyebrow, but immediately stopped what he was doing. "What is it? Is something wrong?" Luke stood, throwing the brush on a bale of hay then thrusting his hands deep in the pockets of his pants.

“Maybe we should sit down to talk,” Nora warned.

Luke leaned back on his heels. “Let’s get this over with right here, Ma. You are looking too serious to waste time finding a seat.”

“You are a smart man.”

“I’m my mother’s son if it is any reassurance.” He smiled again, the love for his mother shining in dark eyes.

Nora noticed how handsome he was, how much he looked like her Robert and told him so. “You have your father’s smile.”

Luke’s eyes darkened. He grinded his teeth and frowned. Nora never understood why he seemed to be angry whenever she spoke of Robert. But now was not the time to find out, she had more important things to deal with.

Nora walked to him, taking his hand in her own. She cocked her head and looked at her oldest son, proud of the man he had become. “I know you don’t like when I talk of your father and I’m not sure why. Perhaps you are still angry at him for leaving us. It’s been ten long years, Luke. It’s time to move on. It’s time to take the bull by its horns and start new lives.”

His eyes widened. “What? Are you trying to tell me you are marrying someone else? I didn’t even know you were courting anyone. How did I miss this? Ma, what is this about?”

“There will be a marriage.”

“What!”

“But it won’t be me.”

“What do you mean? What in tar-nation are you trying to tell me then?”

Nora sighed. Her eldest son was so dramatic. He was an angry man, filled with discontentment and yet was the most loyal and trusting one out of all her sons. She imagined Robert

would have been so proud of his oldest son. “I’ve determined none of my boys will ever leave here to try to find a life outside of this ranch. Or,” she held up her hand, seeing his mouth start to open wide, “bring a bride here to make a life as I have.”

Luke stared. He shook his head. “I don’t care about making any other life. I’m perfectly happy right where I am.”

“Let me finish. Ranching is a hard, lonely life. When the day is finally over and all the work is done, what do you do?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know, either take up with Sam or Adam and play cards with the other hands on the ranch. What does it matter?”

“Luke, you haven’t experienced true love. Sitting on the porch, having a glass of lemonade with the person that means the most to you will bring out the best in you. Imagine a walk at night watching the stars, working hard all day to be able to give your wife a kiss when you get home. There’s so much more to this life than you are experiencing.”

“I don’t care about those things.”

“You don’t because you haven’t experienced them. Luke, I’ve taken matters in to my own hands.”

He turned. “Ma, what did you do?”

She nodded, determined to make him understand. “I’ve sent for a mail-order bride for you, Luke. Please, before you refuse, just please give it a chance.”

“No.”

“It’s too late, she is already on her way here.”

He shoved his fists deeper in his pockets. She almost smiled at the way some things never changed. He’d been doing that since he was five years old and found out he had pockets in the britches he wore.

“What? You can’t order a mail-order bride and not even ask me! Besides, what kind of woman would do such a thing as come out to the West not knowing what she was getting?”

He pulled his hands out and then they went back in his pockets. Soon, he’d balance himself on his heels.

“A woman who is forced to marry an old man three times her age by parents who only want the money the marriage promises, that’s who. There are even worse stories I’m told.”

She actually noticed a worried look cross his face. Her son actually had some emotion when it came to other people besides his own family. What a nice surprise to realize. She’d have to play on that, even though it wasn’t nice to do so. But he wasn’t giving her much choice. His refusal was expected but this was harder than she had thought.

Was she doing the exact same thing his bride’s family was doing? Forcing a marriage on two people who didn’t want to be married? Biting the side of her bottom lip, Nora was determined to see her sons happy and they would never do this on their own. She had to help them. It was a whole different situation than the brides.

“The contract from the match-making agency is clear. You must marry immediately upon meeting, however, if, after three months, you both wish to part ways, there will be an annulment granted as long as the marriage bed is still pure.”

“No.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“The answer is still no.”

She wasn’t going to drag him to the alter. He had to at least want a small part of this. What was she able to dangle in front of him to convince him to give it a try?

“I’ll give your father’s pistol to you if you agree to try this

for three months."

"Agree."

"I know it's not exactly what you, what did you say?"

"Agree. I've wanted that pistol every since Samuel said he was going to claim it last year."

Nora blinked. "You would marry this bride so you can get one up on your brother?"

Luke nodded. "Kind of looks that way, huh?"

Nora threw her hands up in the air. "Oh, for Pete's sake! If that's all I had to do, well, then when it comes time to have the talk with your brothers, tell me what they want?"

Luke backed up, his hands out in front of him. "Now, Ma, do not make me tell my brother's secrets."

Nora smiled. She knew Luke would tell her. If he had to get married, he'd make darn sure it was going to happen to his brothers as well. "It's a yes, then?"

"Of course."

She placed her hands on her hips, a smile from ear to ear. "Well then, be ready to pick up your new bride at eight-thirty Saturday morning at the train station in Wichita Falls."

"So soon?"

"I'm afraid so. Now, what is it the other boys want most of all?"

Luke shook his head. "I'll tell you when the time is right." He straightened up, a serious look on his face. "Ma, even though I'm getting married, you will always be my favorite girl."

A tear slipped down Nora's cheek. Her first born would always be special, too. Instead of telling him that, she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a big old hug. "I love you, son. You know I'm doing this for you. All I

want is for you to be happy."

"I know, Ma."

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